



風の海 迷宮の岸 上

十二国記

white
heart

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Kaze no Umi, Meikyuu no Kishi

Sea of The Wind, Shore of The Maze

Volume 1

By Fuyumi Ono

Prologue

Snow drifted from the sky.

The large and heavy snowflakes fell as if they would never stop.

To look up at the sky was to see a canvas of white with countless dull, gray shadows painted upon it. His line of sight followed the snow sweeping across his entire field of vision into the sky, and before he knew it, all he saw was white.

He watched as a snowflake drift lightly onto his shoulder. It was a big, thick snowflake that looked almost like a crystal made of cotton. Snowflakes fell continuously onto his shoulders, arms and his bright red palms. They immediately melted into the transparent color of water.

His breath really showed how piercingly frigid it was, more so than the white snow. He turned his small child's slender neck and the white of his breath followed his movements and hung in the air, making him feel chillier.

He had already stood there for an hour.

His little hands and exposed knees were all red like a completely ripened fruit, and he had lost all feeling in them. No matter how he rubbed or covered them, he felt only the cold seep into his bones. So he was like this, feeling nothing as he stared uncertainly into the air.

This was the yard on the northern side.

A storehouse that was no longer in use stood in the corner of the narrow yard. A crack in the earthen wall made the air even colder.

The three sides of the courtyard were the main building, the storehouse, and where the wall contained the yard. However, at this frigid and windless time, there was nothing he could use in this place to shelter him from the cold.

There wasn't even anything in the yard one could call a tree. For a time in the summer, the irises would bloom, but right now, the ground was only scattered with the white snow.

"What a stubborn child." His grandmother had moved from the Kansai region

when she had gotten married, but when she spoke, she still carried a thick accent.

"He could at least cry a little. Even a little bit would let people know that he feels bad."

"Mother, you don't have to be so harsh."

"It's because you dote on him so much that he's become so stubborn."

"But..."

"Today's young parents only know how to please their children. It's better if the children receive some strict discipline."

"But mother, what if he gets a cold..."

"He won't get a cold from a little bit of snow. —You listen to me. Unless he sincerely apologizes, he's not allowed back inside."

He just stood there.

In fact, all this had originally happened because of a small matter; someone had dripped water onto the floorboards under the sink and hadn't wiped it up.

His younger brother blamed him and he denied that he'd done it.

By his thinking, it was because he didn't remember doing such a thing that he felt secure enough to say that he didn't do it. His grandmother often warned him that telling lies was the worst thing he could do, so he didn't want to lie and say that he had done such a thing.

"Just be honest and apologize, and the matter would be over."

Grandmother had said it very severely, so he could only explain again that he hadn't done it.

"Why are you so stubborn?"

His grandmother always said this about him, so his young mind decided that he was indeed stubborn.

Even though he wasn't too clear on what exactly "stubborn" meant, he had his own way of explaining it: because I'm a "stubborn" child, grandmother doesn't like me.

He hadn't cried because he was confused.

His grandmother wanted him to apologize, but if he had given in and done so, wouldn't he have become the kind of lying child that his grandmother hated so much? He didn't know what the right thing to do was. He felt very anxious.

The hallway extended horizontally in front of him. Beyond the hallway's glass window was the paper door of the kitchen. Through the half piece of glass installed in the paper door, he could see his grandmother and his mother arguing in the kitchen.

The two of them arguing made him feel very sad. Usually, in the end his mother would admit she was wrong, and then she would have no choice but to quickly clean the bathroom. He knew that his mother would eventually hide in the bathroom and secretly weep.

—I wonder if mommy is crying again.

He thought about this as he stood uncertainly.

His feet felt a little numb. He moved all his weight onto one foot and felt a dull pain in his knee. He could not feel the tips of his feet, but he still forced himself to try to move a little more. As a result, he immediately felt and retreated from a sharp, cold pain. He could feel the snow melting on his knees, melting into an icy water that trickled down his calf.

He sighed heavily the way children do.

A puff of wind suddenly brushed the back of his neck. It wasn't a cold, empty draft but a very warm breeze.

He looked around because he thought that someone had felt sorry for him and opened a door for his sake.

However, after he looked all around him, he found that all the windows were still shut tightly. The window facing the opposite room was covered in a thin fog because of the warm air inside.

He tilted his head suspiciously and looked around once more. The warm air still didn't stop blowing onto him.

He looked towards the side of the storehouse and immediately blinked his eyes

in surprise.

A white object extended from the small crevice between the storehouse and the wall.

It looked like a person's arm, a completely bare arm, white and full, reaching out from the crevice behind the storehouse, but he couldn't see to whom the arm belonged. He thought, *Could they be hiding behind the storehouse?*

He felt like that was unthinkable.

The space in the crevice between the storehouse and the wall was too small. Yesterday, his brother had cried the whole day because he couldn't get the baseball that had rolled into the narrow crack. Even with his or his brother's small bodies, they couldn't fit anything in the crevice but their arms. That arm looked like it belonged to an adult, yet how were they able to fit into that space?

The forearm portion of the arm was swaying as if it were stirring water. He realized that the hand was beckoning to him, and then he took a step toward it. It was very strange that although his knees were numb from the cold, they didn't make any dry, rough sounds.

He didn't feel the least bit frightened, because he realized that the warm air was blowing from that direction.

He was really very cold and he also didn't know what he should do, so he obediently walked over towards the arm.

The snow had already completely coated the ground, almost covering all of his little footprints, eventually leaving no trace of him.

The white sky resembled faded ink, the color gradually changing.

The white of the short winter day gradually turned into the color of night.

Chapter 1

No one knows how a life is actually created. Especially speaking of the biology of things that are not human, this is even more of a riddle.

Life and consciousness suddenly arrived upon her body just like this.

When she came to, her body was under a white tree branch, and there was only one name in her mind.

--Taiki.

In the process of getting up, this name slowly occupied the whole of her mind. At the same time, she also got a hold on the rest of the situation: who she was, why she was born, as well as what her most important mission was.

--Taiki.

She propped up her upper body. These ideas were still flooding her mind, and they simultaneously spread into every corner of her body.

She straightened her waist, as if she was letting water that had dripped onto her body trickle onto every surface. She lifted her head and closed her eyes. Teardrops slid down from the corners of her eyes and dribbled into her damp hair.

She tried to move her feet, which did not yet have any strength in them, and bumped into the wet soil and golden shards next to her feet.

The shards once belonged to the egg shell that protected her, and the liquid that had originally filled the egg had already been absorbed by the soil. She had just hatched from inside the shell, and the golden egg that had contained her had fallen down from a branch, breaking into pieces all over the ground.

She stared at the shards of the golden egg, and after a little bit, lifted her head again to look at the white branch in front of her. As if it were made of white silver, the long branch extended beyond the top of her head and outward. The root was sturdily set into the high cliff wall.

On the branch, there were still a few little, round golden fruits. Although no

one had told her, she already knew by intuition that there were still unhatched lives inside all the fruits, and not too long ago, she herself had also waited like this in the fruit to be hatched.

This is how life is actually created.

--Taiki.

She used her strength to prop up her four legs and stood up, while she cried once again.

Her tears flowed only to protect her two eyes, which had been exposed to the outside air for the first time, but the feeling of the warm, wet tears slipping down made her feel as if the only name that she held in her mind was slowly seeping into the very depths of her body.

She wordlessly called out "Taiki! Taiki!" and again tears welled up in her eyes.

She stood up straight and discovered that her hair was hooked on a branch. The four legs on the lower half of her body stood firmly on the ground, whereupon she used the two hands on the upper half of her body to push aside the branch.

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"You've hatched?"

Suddenly hearing someone speak, she turned her head to look for the source of the sound.

It was very dim all around. Only the branch above her head gave off a white glow.

After waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, she then saw that she was in an enormous cave.

This was a particularly big cave in the shape of a half-circle with a white tree dangling in the middle.

Those branches that were hanging over her, were actually the roots of the tree. These roots had cut through the cliff wall and hung very intricately from a place extremely high in the cave and reached all the way down to her feet.

"Yes."

Suddenly, the sound was even closer.

"You look like a very good nyokai."

She looked around again.

This time, she immediately found the person to whom the voice belonged. It was a hunchbacked old woman who was standing only a few steps from her.

This short old woman's height only reached her chest. The old woman reached out with her two gnarled hands and lightly stroked her hair.

"You are female."

And then the old woman stroked her cheeks.

"You have the neck of a fish."

Then she patted her wrists.

"The upper half of your body is human..."

The hand that had rested on her back slid down and she lightly patted her tail bone.

"...the lower half of your body is that of a leopard, and your tail is that of a lizard. What a terrific mix!"

Finally, the old woman softly pressed on the backbone that connected both parts of her body.

"All right, stop crying. Come with me."

So she followed the old woman. With every step, her tears fell to the dry earth and left little black dots.

They walked slowly and spent a long time passing through the cave before she saw a set of stairs where the top of the arc-shaped cliff wall met the dirt below their feet.

"You will be called Sanshi!"

The old woman finally spoke.

"San, Shi. From now on, everyone will call you Sanshi."

She silently took steps upward on the stone stairs and listened at the same time to the old woman speak.

"Your surname will be Haku, for this is the rule for all nyokai hatched upon Mt. Hou."

The stone stairs made a big turn, and after she went up the steps a bit, she suddenly saw a ray of light.

"The reason you can have a surname is because you carry on your back a very important mission. You must never forget this."

She nodded her head. As to what this very important mission was, she didn't need the old woman to tell her, for it was already very clear to her.

Once again, she firmly engraved into her mind the mission that she was to shoulder as she silently walked up the stone steps. After ascending a ways, the field of vision in front of her opened up. It turned out that the higher the stone steps went, the wider they became, and at the end, there was a square cave opening.

She stopped walking.

She lifted her head and looked out of the opening, seeing only the pale blue sky and the trunk and branches of a dazzlingly big white tree reaching up into the sky.

The tears that were so hard to stop before started flowing again though she tried to stifle them.

The old woman patted her back again.

"All right, you should go."

She took a few strides and then began to run, using the four legs that had just been hatched to run for the first time.

As soon as she leapt from the cave opening, sunlight splashed upon her body and pierced her eyes so that she began to cry again. She ran straight to a spot under the tree.

Her egg had originally formed among the roots of the tree. Compared to the long and slender roots, the trunk itself appeared to be short and thick. The long

branches reached from the mossy stone steps to the sky, and on one of the snow-white branches, there grew a golden fruit.

"Taiki!"

She said something for the first time.

The golden fruit had grown in the same corresponding area as her egg. The fruit was still very small, so small that you could wrap two hands around it. The sunlight shined upon her sensitive skin, which was not completely dry yet. She used both her hands to surround the fruit and carefully pressed her cheek against it.

She was still crying.

"Taiki..."

This was Sanshi's birth.

The Yellow Sea is situated at the center of the world.

Although it's called the Yellow Sea, it isn't made up of water. The only things that flow in the Yellow Sea are time and the wind. What's left over are boundless deserts and endless forests, as well as large swamps and continuous mountains.

In the center of the Yellow Sea, there is a particularly high mountain range. This mountain range is called the "Five Mountains" and consists of five lofty mountains with complex shapes.

The tallest mountain located at the very center is called, "High Su." The mountains connected all around it are separated into Mt. Hou, Mt. Ka, Mt. Kaku, and Mt. Kou. In ancient times, Mt. Hou was called Mt. Tai, but every time a disaster occurs, the name is changed. For the last thousand years, it has always been called Mt. Hou.

Legend has it that the Five Mountains belong under the authority of Seioubo, and Mt. Hou belongs to Oufujin. Regarding the masters of the other four mountains, the rumors have always varied. Regardless of whether these legends are real or fake, it is known absolutely that the Five Mountains are the lands of goddesses and nyosen.

All of the Five Mountains reach up very high in the sky, but, like the Yellow Sea

at their base, they are very uncultivated. The complex terrain is made up of only trees, rocks, water, and a wind that never stops blowing.

There is a small palace on the middle section of Mt. Hou, called "Houro Palace." This is the only place in not just Mt. Hou but the whole of the Five Mountains where people live.

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"Oh? It's a poppy."

Teiei mumbled to herself as she squatted down for a closer look.

She was drawn to several poppy flower petals on the surface of the spring water.

Youka, who had been walking behind Teiei, also stopped. The radiant red flower petals floating on the crystal clear surface of the water was such that it drew people's eyes to it.

"Are they from the poppy garden?"

Teiei nodded her head in reply to Youka's question and extended her hand again to pull some petals out of the water.

"The wind probably blew them over here. The wind feels a little bit different today."

Youka nodded her head in agreement and then lifted her head and looked around.

Interesting rocks can be seen everywhere on Mt. Hou. The green moss that grows all over the surface of the rocks turned the perimeter outside of Houro Palace into a maze, especially on the high terrace where Houro Palace sits.

The crags are really worthy of their reputation. The surface is rugged and goes in and out as if the towering rocks will collapse at any time. Even the smaller of the rocks are three times the height of a person.

In addition, the small paths that weave through the rocks are so narrow that they only allow two women to pass through at one time, walking shoulder to shoulder.

Teiei was now walking on a small path, stopping en route to gather the poppy petals drifting around on the surface of the mountain spring water.

She was a nyosen who looked as if she were eighteen or nineteen, but a nyosen's age could not be determined by looking at her appearance. Neither how nor when she became a shousen are clear even to her.

This meant that she had arrived at Mt. Hou a very long time ago. Out of the over fifty nyosen, Teiei had lived on Mt. Hou the longest.

Opposite to her, Youka had just become a nyosen not too long ago. Only 16 years of age, she was originally a girl from an ordinary peasant family. However, not knowing why she was totally incompatible with the common customs, at the age of 13, she took the shousen oath, and from then on, did not eat grain.

She spent three years at the shrine of Seioubo living a pious life, and she finally attained purity just recently and was summoned up to Mt. Hou.

Thus, it had not been long since the day Youka arrived at Mt. Hou. She had just moved from living on Mt. High Su to Houro Palace only half a month ago, but even she felt as if the wind that day did not blow as it usually did.

Ordinarily, the wind calmly whisked through the small path, but this day, it was both strong and urgent. At one second, it blew powerfully up the crags into the sky, and at the next, it scraped the edges of the cliff walls downward, curling into a gusty whirlwind. Even the sky was looking murky. Since there was only a thin layer of clouds, they didn't know why it gave off such an oppressive feeling.

"Is this some sort of omen?"

Teiei tilted her head to contemplate the question Youka had brought up.

"It shouldn't be. This morning's Eight Diagrams divination symbol didn't show that anything would occur. Come on, let's hurry and draw water out and then get back."

"Yes."

Youka tossed the bucket that was in her hands into the spring water.

This pool of spring water is called "Kaidou Spring." The spring water gushes endlessly from the base of the crags, and a great sea paulownia (kaidou) tree

covers the tops of the crags around the pool.

Of course, the spring water of Houro Palace doesn't come from just this one pool. No one has been silly enough to count how many springs there are in all, but the number is many, so it follows that they had to name every spring lest they confuse them.

On Mt. Hou, there are no differences in the seasons. Flowers can bloom throughout the year. For instance, right then there were a few little fluffy white sea paulownia flowers floating on the surface of the spring. Because the fragrance of the flowers had permeated the water, though it was not known when it started, the wooden water bucket also gave off the scent of the sea paulownia flower.

The scented water in the bucket is for an offering at Taishin Shrine in Houro Palace for the patron goddess of Mt. Hou--it is used for washing the wooden image of Oufujin.

Youka pushed aside the flowers as she filled the bucket with water, and then she turned around and prepared to walk in the direction of Taishin Shrine. At this time, Teiei smiled and called out to her.

"Where are you going?"

"Hm? I'm going to help Oufu..."

Teiei laughed.

"The shrine isn't in that direction! Don't you remember which way to walk yet?"

Youka looked at the three diverging paths and her face could not help turning red.

"I've really gotten the direction wrong."

The rocks and the countless diverging paths made Mt. Hou into an absolute maze.

The only ones who can master all the routes are those who live on Mt. Hou. Only the nyosen who live here can choose the right route in the spider-web-like paths, in order to get to the side of a clear river to wash clothes, to a waterfall to

bathe, or to a pure spring to draw water. The area wasn't big, whether she wanted to reach the grasslands, flower gardens, and vegetable gardens, all splashed with sunlight, or she wanted to visit the little palaces sprinkled around Mt. Hou. However, for Youka, who was a new nyosen, she still needed a bit of time to get around.

"Why are the paths here so complicated...?"

Hearing Youka sighing like this, Teiei smiled.

"It's there to protect the Mt. Hou Kou! Just endure it for a little bit."

The land is shaped like a maze in order to prevent intrusion by outsiders.

Regular people or animals would not be able to make their way up the rocks. And although youju possess the ability to do so, they are generally not allowed into Houro Palace with only a few exceptions.

Also, the paths through the strange rocks are very narrow, so those that come to visit must leave their mounts at the base and walk up to Houro Palace alone.

As soon as one steps onto the small paths, they will notice the interlocking grid, just like a labyrinth.

The enormous crags will block your lines of sight. And amongst the rocks that are covered by the damp green moss, the elaborate stone slabs on the small paths have formed innumerable diverging roads and tunnels that cause people to lose their sense of direction in the blink of an eye.

Only those familiar with Houro Palace are able to find their way and arrive at that place, unique in this world, a high terrace full of plants and trees.

"So that's how it is."

Hidden in the deepest part of the maze is the Shashinboku, and on this tree, the fruit of the kirin grow.

In this world, whether human, beast, or any other living thing, they all grow in fruits on white trees.

However, the only fruits that bear kirin grow on the Shashinboku on Mt. Hou.

Mt. Hou is the holy land where kirin are born. Houro Palace and the nyosen in

it all exist for the sake of the kirin. The kirin are the masters of Mt. Hou, thus they are also called "Mt. Hou Kou."

Teiei nodded her head.

"There is no bigger responsibility than taking care of the kirin, but there is also no greater happiness.

When the Taika hatches, you should also help us take care of him. However, you must be very careful."

Teiei's words made Youka's eyes glimmer.

"Can I help? Really?"

Actually, Youka had felt a little dissatisfied. Serving the kirin was an important job for the nyosen on Mt. Hou. The remaining jobs were only a few chores. There was a young kirin on Mt. Hou at the time, but because Youka was new, she had not been able to join the task of caring for the kirin.

Teiei laughed.

"But you have to figure out the lay of the land first."

"Yes!"

Youka nodded vigorously.

A few days ago, the Shashinboku finally bore another fruit, and this one was called "Taika."

Youka's thoughts had already drifted over onto that little fruit.

The time from when the Taika is formed to when the kirin is hatched is ten months. A newly born little kirin is extremely adorable. To be able to get so close to the little kirin in order to take care of it, she only had to think of such a situation and she would become so happy, she could not help but laugh.

More poppy flower petals floated from somewhere, silently dropping onto the surface of the water...

"Are those poppies?"

Someone from behind suddenly spoke to them, and Teiei stopped picking up the petals. She turned around and saw a woman coming out of Kaidou Palace,

which was near Kaidou Spring.

Youka looked at the woman uncertainly as she had an unfamiliar face. She couldn't tell her age by her appearance. She looked like she was very young, but she also looked as if she had already passed middle age. She was wearing clothes and accessories that were more magnificent than the ordinary nyosen, and from this, Youka could tell that her status was definitely very high.

"Genkun!"

Teiei kneeled hurriedly. This scared Youka and she quickly kneeled down with Teiei.

This woman was the head of the nyosen at Houro Palace, Tensen Gyokujo Hekika Genkun--

Gyokuyou.

"They're probably flowers from the poppy garden that were blown here by the wind."

Teiei replied. Gyokuyou lifted her pretty face and looked at the sky through an opening in the crags.

"The wind is blowing quite strangely today."

Gyokuyou wrinkled her brow as she stared at the sky for a moment, and then she turned to look at Youka.

"You're called Youka? Have you gotten used to life on Mt. Hou yet?"

Gyokuyou had spoken to Youka so suddenly that for a time, she didn't know quite what to do.

Before she became a nyosen, Youka had only heard Gyokuyou mentioned in legends, a distant figure.

Now that this honorable goddess was standing right in front of her and had spoken to her, how could she not panic?

"Y...yes."

"But she still gets lost!"

Teiei grinned as she added this. Youka heard this and turned red again.

Gyokuyou's laugh sounded like a silver bell.

"Everyone is like this when they first arrive. Even Teiei got lost a long time ago. You'll be fine in a little while."

Youka secretly glanced at Teiei, who was also laughing.

"That's right. Youka's memory is much better than mine. She's also diligent and isn't afraid of getting tired."

Gyokuyou gave a tiny smile.

"That's wonderful."

Youka's face became a deeper red.

"N...no. I still make mistakes often and get lectured."

"Of course you'll get lectured before you become experienced. You shouldn't take it too seriously."

"Yes."

Gyokuyou looked at Youka, who was kneeling down with her forehead earnestly on the ground, and smiled again. She then looked at Teiei who was also smiling at Youka.

"That's right, I've heard that the Nyokai of Tai has been born."

"Yes."

Gyokuyou did not often stay at Houro Palace. Her whereabouts drifted from place to place. Even Teiei didn't know where she ordinarily was, nor did she know when or where she would appear. Though Teiei was very curious, this was not something that a good nyosen could ask about.

"What's her name?"

"Sanshi."

"Where is Sanshi right now?"

"She is standing guard under the Shashinboku, never stepping away an inch."

When she heard Teiei say this, Gyokuyou raised her red lips into a smile.

"The devotion a nyokai has for her kirin is extremely deep!"

Teiei also smiled and nodded.

A kirin did not have parents, yet the nyokai was very similar to a kirin's parent, as she was responsible for protecting them. A nyokai's egg develops on the roots of the Shashinboku. When the fruit of a kirin forms on a tree branch, the nyokai will hatch on the following day. And then, for ten years as the fruit ripens, she will stand guard under the Shashinboku until the kirin is born.

"And the kirin's gender?"

Only a nyokai knows the gender of an unhatched kirin.

"He's called Taiki."

"I see."

A male kirin is named Ki, and a female is named Rin. The clan name of the kingdom is added before this, and the designation of a kirin is formed. This is a rule that has been passed on since very ancient times.

The Ki of Tai Kingdom was growing on the Shashinboku, and the surname of Tai Kingdom is Tai. Thus, the name of this kirin is "Taiki." *[note: tai, the kingdom, and tai, its surname, have the same pronunciation, but different kanji.]*

Gyokuyou nodded her head, turned in the direction of the Shashinboku and started walking. Teiei and Youka lowered their heads to respectfully see her off.

It was then that suddenly the air began to tremble.

A strong wind violently blew into the small paths, as if it wanted to scrape everything off the face of the mountain.

Before they could even say anything, Teiei had already tumbled to the ground. The same had happened to Youka and she let out a scream.

A deep sound occurred all around and pieces broke off the crags. A strange roar came out of the entire maze.

"What's happening...?"

Though Teiei had heard Youka's frightened voice, she was not able to respond.

This was no simple storm or earthquake, for, if it had been, the symbol of the Eight Diagrams would certainly have shown it. Also, under the protection of gods

and goddesses, a simple variation in the weather would not encroach upon Mt. Hou like this.

"Genkun, hide in the palace quickly!"

For the safety of the mistress, Teiei grasped the stone steps firmly with her fingers and wearily lifted her head to look towards Gyokuyou, only to find that Gyokuyou was standing firm, staring up at the sky. The sky had turned red, as if it was covered with curtains of red mist.

"It's a shoku..."

Gyokuyou was not paying any attention to the earthquake, looking directly at the bright lights flying in the sky.

To be able to stand firm when that sudden, strong wind came shows that Gyokuyou had the strength of a goddess. However, Teiei did not currently have the spare time to express her admiration for this.

"Shoku...?"

She could feel that the entire current of the air was already completely twisted, rapidly moving nonstop. And with every movement, the red mist above her head would move about.

In a fissure in the red mist, an image revealed itself like a mirage.

"How...?"

A land that was not of this world drew near.

The soft petals of the poppy flower fluttered along with the strong wind and continuously hit Teiei on the face.

"Ah! The Taika's in danger...!"

Sanshi was crouched under a white tree branch, the wet moss making her skin itch. She looked at the fruit on the end of the branch with happiness.

This fruit, which bore the Taiki inside of it, would ripen in ten months.

After ten months, Sanshi's master will hatch out of this Taika--Taiki. Sanshi needed only to think about the moment that the ripe fruit cracked open and she became so happy that tears would flow from her eyes.

Just when Sanshi's heart was full of joy and pride, in that moment when she had lifted her head to look at the gleaming golden egg, something suddenly happened!

At first, Sanshi was at a loss for what was going on.

The air began to swirl into itself, destroying everything around Sanshi. A red tent-like fog covered the entirety of the sky. Fear made Sanshi's whole body tremble, when finally the word "shoku" floated into her mind.

She suddenly stood up as the fierce winds brushed at her feet. The white branch could not bear the pummeling of the wind, as it shook violently and creaked.

Sanshi shouted loudly and sprung towards the tree branch. She held the branch tightly and straightened her body up against the wind. Her wind-blown hair was messily tangled with the branches. In the violent shaking of the tree branches, a portion of her hair was torn out, but she didn't have time to acknowledge the pain on the top of her head. She thought with all her heart of only protecting the Taika. When she looked up toward the branch, all she saw was the twisting air.

"Taiki!"

The roaring wind continuously hit her body. She saw the already turbulent air spinning even more, as it opened up and devoured the branch.

"No!"

This was how the small golden fruit was drawn into the twisting air. That fruit that should only have been tenderly plucked by Sanshi after ten months, otherwise should never have left the branch, was harshly swept away.

"Help!"

Sanshi reached out and tried to save the fruit with both her hands, which had been scraped by tree branches and was dripping with blood. However, the distance between her hands and the fruit became farther and farther until she despaired.

"Someone come quickly!" Sanshi shouted with all her strength, but it only

reached the end of her outstretched fingers before it dissipated in the wind.

The golden fruit gradually disappeared into whirlwind in this way.

The first sound that Sanshi made after she came into this world was the name of Taiki. And then who would have guessed that the second time she opened her mouth, it would be in a sorrowful crying--a crying that received no replies.

The end came just as suddenly as the beginning.

Sanshi stared blankly at the white branch.

There was no longer a golden radiance at the end of the branch, the solitary fruit had already disappeared leaving neither a shadow nor a trace.

"Sanshi!"

The sound came from all directions as a number of nyosen all ran towards Sanshi.

The first to arrive at Sanshi's side was Gyokuyou.

"Ah... Gyokuyou..."

Sanshi clutched tightly onto the two hands Gyokuyou had reached out.

First, she shouted Gyokuyou's name, and then she let out a sorrowful cry and began wailing.

"How could this happen...?"

Gyokuyou hugged this nyokai, who had been born not too long ago, as she gently stroked her wind-blown hair as well as her scarred body.

"Of all times, it had to happen when the fruit of the kirin was growing..."

The nyokai at her chest was continuously letting out a mournful cry. Originally, in the ten months before the kirin hatched, the nyokai would not leave her post under the tree. The nyokai's feelings toward the kirin were that deep. Now this nyokai had watched wide-eyed as the kirin was taken from her. Gyokuyou could understand her pain.

"Don't worry."

She patted the nyokai's back.

"You don't have to cry like that, Sanshi. We will definitely find Taiki."



Gyokuyou said this quietly. In fact, she was also telling herself this.

"I will return Taiki to your side as quickly as is possible."

"Genkun..."

She nodded to Teiei, who had just arrived.

"Let Suzaku fly to every kingdom and quickly find the direction of the shoku!"

"Yes."

"It must be done before the moon rises. Quickly, assemble the nyosen and prepare to open the gate."

"Yes, I'll go immediately."

The nyosen scattered, and Gyokuyou looked up.

No matter how she looked, there remained no traces of the golden fruit on the white branch.

The shoku had begun on the west side of the Yellow Sea and had swept its way east.

On the Five Mountains, which are protected with divine might, and the even more closely guarded Houro Palace, all the flowers were fluttering about from the crush of the shoku. The shoku brings destruction to any kingdom it arrives at, but the nyosen of Mt. Hou were not concerned with this result. To them, the

most important thing was the kirin.

The question was, where had the shoku taken the fruit?

Shoku are able to travel between this world and another. The worlds outside of this one are called "Hourai" and "Konron." It is said that Hourai lies on the edge of the world and Konron is situated on the other side where the sun never shines.

Regardless of whether this is true or false, the people of this world are unable to enter or pry into the other. Only shoku and the Gogou Gate, opened by the use of moon incantations, are able to connect the two worlds.

This world is surrounded on all sides by the Empty Sea. If the shoku continued east, the Taika would also follow it over the Empty Sea, until it reached the edge of the world--Hourai.

Though ordinary people are not able to travel to Hourai, nyosen are not ordinary people. On Gyokuyou's instruction, several nyosen passed through the Empty Sea searching for the Taika. However, the Taika's whereabouts were still not clear.

--This is how the kirin disappeared.

From that day forward, many people saw the shadow of Sanshi, east of Mt. Hou in the Yellow Sea, constantly searching back and forth.

Chapter 2

Youka spotted Sanshi just as she came out of the spirea tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel, there was a small, circular open area covered with soft green grass, and spireas had grown all over the surface of the crags around the vicinity. One bush was situated right on top of the tunnel with its long and thin white branches hanging down, as if it were a curtain of beads covering the entrance to the tunnel.

When Youka pulled aside the flower curtain, she saw Sanshi leap down from the top of the rocks.

Youka put down the bucket of water from Kaidou Spring that she had just filled.

Nyokai were able to traverse freely upon the crags, unlike people or horses. Thus, it was not unusual to see Sanshi jump down from above, but it had already been a long time since Sanshi had made an appearance.

"Sanshi, you're back."

The nyokai had passed through this maze and went to the east to look for the Taika. Whenever she traveled to a distant place, she would not ordinarily come back within the space of a month.

The nyosen at Houro Palace all knew the reason for her trips. She always searched until she was completely exhausted and came back with a weary look on her face.

"I just came back from getting some water. You should rest here for a little bit."

When Sanshi heard Youka say this, she obediently bent her four leopard legs and crouched under the spirea flowers with her snow-white body.

"But you were gone so long this time. Did you go to the edge of the Yellow Sea to search?"

If she could have, the nyokai would've liked to cross the Kongou Mountains at

the edge of the Yellow Sea, to look even farther east. There was no living creature that could go over the Kongou Mountains. No one knew the reason, but this was a rule from very ancient times.

"Here, drink a little."

Youka pushed the wooden bucket to Sanshi's lips, and Sanshi drank water from the bucket.

She watched as Sanshi took a few gulps and then lifted her head. Youka took out an embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve and moistened it. She then gently wrung it dry and used it to cover Sanshi's foot. She had been supporting Sanshi with her hand, so she knew that Sanshi's feet were radiating heat.

"Ah, your feet are so swollen."

She wrapped Sanshi's claws with the cloth. Sanshi closed her eyes in relief, and leaned her head gently against the bunch of spirea flowers, her weight causing the flowers to drift down in succession.

A long time ago, all the spireas here had been pulled out with their roots, not one remaining.

--That was ten years ago.

"Comfortable? From now on, don't go so far."

Sanshi didn't reply, but Youka didn't mind, because Sanshi had always been like this.

The powerful shoku that had previously descended upon Houro Palace didn't alter the shape of the land on the Five Mountains, but the places and landscapes outside of the Five Mountains underwent a great change. The fruit of the white tree was thusly swept away to an unknown place.

At that time, the nyokai had wept profusely, but afterwards, no one ever heard a sound from her.

Youka used the handkerchief she had moistened and carefully applied it to Sanshi's legs.

"Does it still hurt? You should go to the river and soak them in the cold water."

She poured out the water that was now warm. Sanshi wordlessly stood up and walked aside.

However, Sanshi wasn't headed toward the river. She wanted to return to the Shashinboku. Youka knew this much, but she didn't stop her.

This was because Youka could understand Sanshi's feelings.

At first, Teiei had told her that after the fruit of the kirin hatched, Youka would be able to help take care of him.

When she was a part of the human world, she knew that the ordinary person didn't have the chance to see a kirin. When she had finally become a nyosen, taking care of Taiki was originally going to be her first meaningful job and also her first opportunity to come close to a kirin.

She would never have thought that the fruit would disappear like that. Youka, who had originally filled her heart with anticipation, had been disappointed by the loss. And because Sanshi lost the one she was to nurture, the breasts on her upper human half had shrunk to the size of a girl's, leaving only small bulges. In addition, the feet on her lower leopard half were now extremely red and swollen due to all the long-distance running she had been doing. Similar to Sanshi, Youka held in her heart the pain of emptiness.

The fruit had been swept away ten years ago. All the nyosen had said that Taiki would never return and that, in a short while, the Shashinboku would bear a new fruit. This would mean that the kirin who had disappeared had already died in an unknown place.

Though it had been like this, they still refused to give up hope. Since then, Sanshi still went back and forth through the east to search, and in her heart, Youka constantly thought of Taiki. Youka would pray for Sanshi, prepare a few necessities for her, and in her spare time, learn how to take care of a kirin. She could not help but want to do these things, and thus could empathize with Sanshi's pain. And Sanshi was the same.

Of all the nyosen, she was closest to Youka.

After she watched Sanshi's tired frame leave, she picked up the water bucket.

When she turned her body, preparing to get more water, a nyosen moved the

spirea flower curtain and came out of the tunnel.

"Isn't Sanshi here?"

Youka turned her head to look at the path that Sanshi had taken, but she could not see her outline anymore.

"She went to the Shashinboku."

"Can you quickly go get her?"

"But I have to go get water..."

"This is an order from Genkun."

Youka opened her eyes widely.

"I think we've found out where Taiki is."

Youka rushed to get Sanshi, and then the two of them ran to Hakki Palace to see Gyokuyou.

All the buildings in Houro Palace are either palaces or temples. Because the crags are able to block the wind and the weather on Mt. Hou is inherently good, neither cold nor hot, the buildings only need to have roofs as shelter from the rain.

Youka walked on the small paths, ran up five sections of white stone stairs, and hurried onto the white stone floor of the palace. At the same time, Teiei was also running in.

"I've brought Sanshi here."

Youka knelt upon the octagonal floor. Gyokuyou nodded her head from the chair in which she was sitting.

Teiei lifted her head.

"Have they found the Taika like I've heard?"

"The Kirin of En helped us find it."

"Then it must be right!"

This was almost a miracle. All the nyosen on Mt. Hou had already lost all hope. In Mt. Hou's history, there had never been a kirin that was found after being lost

for ten years. Kirin have drifted to Hourai before, but they were all found and returned within five years. The length of ten years was really so long that Teiei was shocked.

Gyokuyou smiled.

"It should be right... Since the kirin drifted to Hourai, it has turned into a taika, but a kirin can still sense another kirin's spirit. Thus, I asked the kirin of various kingdoms if they could cross the Empty Sea to look for Taiki. We finally received some news today."

After the fruit was taken away by the shoku, in another kingdom, it was deposited in the womb of a woman and turned into a taika.

"Was he discovered by En Taiho?"

Gyokuyou used her glazed fan to cover her lips as she laughed.

"It seems as if En Taiho often crosses the Empty Sea to go to Hourai. I have always thought that if anyone could find the Taika, it would be him. I didn't think that I would have guessed right."

Actually, kirin often run all over the place and it's not particularly special, but right now, no one concerned themselves with that.

"We heard that he had discovered a kirin in Hourai. Currently, the only kirin whose whereabouts are unknown is Taiki, so it should be him."

"Yes..."

With this talk, it seemed as if the kirin would really return!

"Then I should assemble the nyosen immediately..."

Gyokuyou interrupted Teiei mid-sentence.

"There's no need."

"But..."

Gyokuyou turned to look at a blankly-staring Sanshi, who was standing behind Teiei and Youka. She set her fan on the table and then reached out with both hands.

"Sanshi, come here."

Sanshi slowly strode toward Gyokuyou.

"I told you that we would find Taiki and bring him back. I didn't trick you, did I?"

Gyokuyou took Sanshi's hand.

"Please forgive us for making you wait so long."

She patted Sanshi's hand.

"There's a gate where the roots of the Shashinboku are. You should go. And this time, use your hands to pull Taiki back to us."

Sanshi's round eyes filled with tears, but she didn't cry. She turned and flew out the door.

Gyokuyou squinted to see Sanshi's figure getting farther and farther away. She waited until Sanshi turned onto a small path and was not visible anymore. She turned to Teiei and laughed cheerfully.

"At last, a season of celebration has come to Mt. Hou!"

- - - - -

Sanshi ran as fast as she could. When she arrived at the nest of her birth--the bottom part of the Shashinboku, she saw a young woman standing under the trunk of the tree. The woman was pointing down towards her feet where there was a round hole giving off a white glow.

Many nyosen had already gathered here, but Sanshi did not have the time to pay them any attention.

She ran straight to that woman.

The Shashinboku was on an enormous rock at the side of a cliff. The woman was standing right next to a root on top of a rock covered in moss.

Aside the woman's feet was a silver ring. On closer inspection, the ring wasn't a ring at all. It was a snake. This silvery-white snake had two tails and a curved body. One of its tails was held in its mouth, forming a circle.

This snake gave off a shallow glow, as if rays of light were shining on it from the sky and a glow was coming from the green moss under it.

Sanshi stopped. The woman smiled beautifully and reached her right hand out towards Sanshi. The other tail of the snake was wrapped around this hand.

"You must be Sanshi."

Sanshi looked at her and then at the glowing ring of the snake. The ring was about as wide as a circle formed with one's arms, and inside, pale white shadows formed a tunnel. At the end of the tunnel there was another round hole, and through that small hole, she could only see a very unusual sort of building, an area that appeared to be a yard, and a round, golden shadow. However, for Sanshi, this was already enough.

--Taiki!

No matter what, there was no way she wouldn't recognize that golden shadow. It was Taiki!

"You should go in. However, no matter what happens, you must not let go of my hand."

Sanshi didn't recognize this woman, but right now, she didn't care.

Sanshi held onto her hand, and stepped into the glowing ring. She felt cool air coming at her. At the exit of the tunnel, white snowflakes were fluttering about, like the petals of the spirea.

When she reached the beginning of the tunnel of white light, she suddenly felt her body become more nimble, as she already didn't know where she was. The woman followed Sanshi tightly from behind.

"Keep walking forward."

Hearing the woman say this, Sanshi strode forward. She walked to the end of the tunnel and reached her hand out.

She could now see the scene more clearly. Cold snowflakes were flying everywhere, and a golden shadow was floating in the dark air. This was what she saw.

A closer look at the glimmering shadow would reveal that it was actually the silhouette of a small boy.

However, in Sanshi's eyes, it was a fruit, the same one that she should have

plucked from the white branch ten years ago. This fruit had a shiny golden surface and was just big enough that she would be able to wrap her hands around it.

Sanshi did her best to reach out with her fingers, but she just wasn't able to touch that fruit. She tightened her grip on the woman's hand and, holding the cold air open with her front paws, she reached out even further and beckoned to the fruit. And then she saw the fruit begin to drift towards her.

This was the moment she had been dreaming of for so long! Sanshi tightly grasped the fruit that had drifted over to her hand. She pulled the fruit towards her and it fell into her embrace. When he neared to the white hand, it didn't hesitate at all in grabbing hold of his wrist. Different from his cold skin, that hand made him feel very warm.

Originally, he had wanted to walk towards the hand because he wanted to find out how someone could hide in the small crevice between the storehouse and the wall. However, when he got close, the view of his surroundings suddenly changed in the blink of an eye. It was as if his pupil had been covered by a thin layer of water, so everything that he saw became blurry, their outlines disappearing.

After the hand took hold of his wrist, his body felt as if it drifted into the air, as a burst of energy pulled him toward an unknown place.

He went through a white space filled with a clear mist. He had no idea where he was, but his intuition faintly told him that it was a gentle place.

It was even warmer inside. Moreover, a warm breeze was blowing onto him from a place he didn't know.

His feet didn't feel like they were stepping on anything hard, but neither did he feel like they were stepping on something soft. He thought that perhaps this was what walking on clouds felt like.

He sensed someone beside him, sturdily holding on to his hand, but he could not see who it was.

Through the dense fog, he could barely see a milky white figure swaying, but that might have been just his imagination.

So it stayed like this for a moment, and then the hand that was holding on to his wrists pulled him in another direction. He didn't know why, but he wasn't frightened at all. He just obediently went wherever the hand pulled him.

In the amount of time it approximately takes to walk through a short hallway, he finally saw the sky again, as if he had floated to the surface of a pool.

To suddenly see the dazzling sunlight shocked him momentarily.

Towering in front of him was a great tree. He had never before seen a snow-white tree trunk that looked as if it was made with a pure white metal. The tree trunk was very thick, but not very tall. White branches extended a long way with their ends hanging down.

Behind the tree, he saw marvelous landscapes for the first time in his life. He also saw a strangely-shaped, enormous green rock and a group of unusually dressed women.

Also, the strangest of all was the woman who had been holding on to his hand.

She looked like she was half-human and half-tiger or leopard. Her face was flat and her round eyes were opened wide and radiating a glimmer that was hard to describe. He should have felt scared, but for a reason he didn't understand, he was not. On the contrary, he sensed that those eyes were very gentle.

"Taiki..."

This word came from the lips of the half-woman, half-beast. However, he didn't understand what it meant. And he also didn't know that this was the first time she had spoken in ten years.

"Taiki!"

She used her soft hands to gently stroke his hair, as her round eyes filled with tears.

Like he had always done very naturally with his mother, he held her hand and drew closer to her face.

"Did something happen that hurt you?"

She shook her head not as if she was saying no to Taiki's question, but that he not worry about her.

This action was also very similar to something his mother would have done.

"Taiki? So, is he Taiki?"

It was because of this human voice that finally triggered a realization of his surroundings. Just when he was wondering what strange thing had happened to him, a woman approached him.

"This is very rare."

"Who are you?"

The woman kneeled in front of him.

"I am Gyokuyou. I have probably not seen hair like yours for hundreds of years."

The woman raised her hand and ran her fingers through his hair.

"You are a kokki, a black kirin! This really is very rare."

"Is that weird?" he asked.

He was not looking at the woman who was standing in front of him, but at the half-woman, half-beast beside him holding his hand. He didn't know why, but in his heart, he had already recognized this half-woman, half-beast as someone he could rely on.

She once again shook her head silently.

"Of course it's not weird. This is a very good thing!" said the woman standing in front of him.

"Since you were born in another world, you were probably already given a name. However, here we will call you Taiki."

"Taiki? Why is that?"

"Because this is the rule."

"What is this place? I was just standing in the yard."

He had already realized that what had happened to him wasn't ordinary, but he had not yet come upon anything that would inspire fear or panic in him.

"This is Mt. Hou. This is where you stay."

"I...don't think I understand."

"You will understand in the days to come. Oh, that's right. This is Sanshi, called Haku Sanshi, and her particular responsibility is to take care of you."

He lifted his head to look at the half-woman, half-beast at his side.

"Sanshi..."

Gyokuyou then looked to the side again.

"This is Ren Taiho."

A golden-haired woman was standing next to the white tree trunk. When he followed Gyokuyou's line of sight, he was just able to see the white snake curled around the golden-haired woman's wrist turn into a silver bracelet. That snake had had two tails, and he thought he saw the second tail turn into a silver ring, but because he was so astonished, consequently he didn't dare decide if what he had seen was real or not.

"You should thank her. In order to help Sanshi get you back, she specially lent us her very precious treasure."

He look up to see the golden-haired woman smiling and then glanced at Sanshi again. Sanshi nodded at him, so he then obediently turned toward the golden-haired woman and bowed.

"Thank you."

The golden-haired woman just smiled. Gyokuyou, who had been watching the scene satisfyingly, suddenly straightened up and turned to leave.

"Ah! Gyokuyou..."

"Taiki, you must call me Lady Gyokuyou."

Taiki looked up at Sanshi.

"You should call her Lady Gyokuyou."

Taiki nodded. He didn't know why, but he didn't doubt anything Sanshi said. Even though Sanshi called him Taiki, a name he had never heard before, he felt like he should always have been called by this name, because it had come out of Sanshi's mouth.

"Lady Gyokuyou... I feel like all of this is very unimaginable!"

He didn't quite know how to express his feelings of uncertainty.

Gyokuyou smiled as she looked at him.

"You will get used to it very soon. Just ask Sanshi if there is anything you don't understand."

Once again, he looked up at Sanshi. Sanshi gave him a smile--Sanshi didn't really have any expression

on her face, but he thought he saw a small trace of a smile.

"Yes."

He tightened his hold on Sanshi's hand, and he felt Sanshi reply with an even stronger squeeze.

"Sanshi, Sanshi! Let us get a good look at this child!"

"Come here, Taiki. I'll help you change your clothes."

"Don't change your clothes yet. Have a drink of water. Or did you want eat a peach?"

"There are still plums and pears."

After Gyokuyou and the woman wearing the bracelet left, the nyosen swarmed upon him, leaving Taiki surrounded and not knowing what to do.

Although the smiling faces of the nyosen let Taiki know that they were welcoming him, this situation was still a little too unusual. He held onto Sanshi's hand tightly and leaned towards her. The nyosen saw this and laughed.

"Ah, he just wants to be with Sanshi!"

"Sanshi, you can't have him all to yourself!"

"Taiki, come over here."

Finally Teiei could not watch this any longer.

"Taiki won't know what to do with all of you like this. Everyone calm down a little bit, and let Sanshi take care of Taiki." After saying this, Teiei turned to Youka, who had been standing to one side. "Take Taiki back to the palace. It should be

better to take him to Rosen Palace."

Teiei knew that up until now Youka had been preparing Rosen Palace for Taiki's return. Youka looked gratefully at Teiei for a moment and then vigorously nodded her head.

Youka walked slowly to Taiki and knelt down so that she and Taiki were at the same height. Taiki looked straight at her.

"Your servant wholeheartedly welcomes your return."

Taiki felt the arm, which Sanshi had laid upon his shoulders in order to protect him, loosen. Sanshi gently pressed him forward, closer to the kneeling Youka.

"May I ask who you are?"

"I'm called Youka."

"Lady Youka..." He had only said this much before the nyosen that surrounded him burst out again in laughter. Youka's face carried a smile upon it as well.

"Please just call me Youka. You only need to address Genkun as Lady."

"Genkun?"

"She is Lady Gyokuyou."

Taiki looked at Sanshi, and Sanshi nodded. Thus, Taiki accepted this way of speaking.

"Then... Youka, who are you? Why do you call my arrival a return?"

"I am a nyosen who lives here on Mt. Hou, and you, Taiki, are the master of Mt. Hou. In fact, you were born here!"

Taiki's eyes widened and he stared at Youka for a moment.

"I was born here...?"

"Yes." Youka nodded. "You could also say that this is your homeland."

"But..."

Youka shook her head to stop Taiki from continuing.

"We could not find you because a change occurred in the world and you drifted to another place. We really searched for you for a very long time." An

expression of both joy and uneasiness crossed Youka's face. "We were all so worried, because we didn't know where you were or what kind of life you were living.

You've finally come back, which is something that we are all very happy about. We truly welcome your return."

Taiki only stared blankly at Youka.

So he wasn't the child of his parents.

When this thought occurred to him, it was as if all his uncertainties had been resolved. He now had a very good explanation for why his grandmother disliked him so much and for why he never felt like he fit into his surroundings.

In truth, he had never really gotten along with his family. That wasn't what he had wanted, so he had tried hard to improve relations with his family. However, it seemed like they always had a chasm between them that was too wide to jump over.

Like many children, he thought about all the ways that he was not similar to other people. He wouldn't have thought that his feelings were right.

"Then...is Sanshi my real mother?" He looked back and forth between Sanshi and Youka and saw them both shake their heads.

"Sanshi is your servant. It is her personal responsibility to take care of you. And I am a nyosen. My responsibility is to handle a few chores so that your time at Mt. Hou is even more comfortable."

"Then where is my real mother?"

Youka looked up at the tree. "You were hatched from a fruit that grew on this tree. This is Tentei's blessing."

Taiki also looked up at the white tree. Not only was there no fruit on the tree right now, but there was also not one flower or leaf. Taiki still understood too little about the creation of life, so he didn't have any difficulty in believing any of the things that Youka had said.

Taiki imagined that when season arrived for the fruit to grow, that tree would certainly be full of red fruit. And the fruit must be very big if he had first jumped

out from one of them.

Though he did feel that using this method to arrive in the world was a little strange, he had always thought that he had been different from most people. He understood now that it all had to do with how he had been born.

(So it had all been because of this.)

It was all because he had been taken in from the outside that his grandmother hated him. He probably also created a problem for his mother. Because he had come down from a tree, he was never able to win the love of his grandmother or parents.

--He didn't have parents. He didn't know exactly why, but he didn't have real parents.

These thoughts didn't seem illogical to him, so he believed them without a shadow of doubt. This way of thinking was very reasonable to him and had no trouble spots for him. However, it also made him feel bad.

"What's the matter?"

When he suddenly heard Youka ask him this, he hurriedly closed his mouth and shook his head vigorously. Sanshi pulled him closer, as if to comfort him, so he leaned his whole body onto her.

--Now he knew.

(I wasn't originally born to my parents.)

Several memories floated into his head.

He remembered his grandmother's looks of contempt and his father's reprimands. No matter how hard he tried, he could never meet their expectations. And whenever his mother argued with his father or grandmother over him, which was often, she would always end up hiding in the bathroom alone and secretly weep. His brother was also often lectured, but he always accused him for making him do it.

"I don't know what to do with him," his young teacher had said. "He doesn't get along with any of his classmates, so I don't know what would be the best thing for me to do."

She had looked at him with concern. "For a child his age not to have any friends at school is a pretty serious problem."

His grandmother had pursed her wrinkled lips in dissatisfaction. "Why doesn't anyone want to be your friend?"

"Mother, don't be like this. It's the other kids who are purposefully excluding him."

"Well, that's just because there's a problem with his personality. Why can't he just get along with his classmates?"

"Because he's a scaredy-cat! That's why no one plays with him!"

"Don't interrupt! You only know how to bully people. It's all because your mother didn't teach you guys right that both of you have let us down. Is our family not going to have any children who make anything of themselves?"

"Mother..."

After his grandmother's nagging, in the end she would always come to the conclusion that it was his mother's fault. That's why his mother would always hide in the bathroom and cry.

"Why are you this way?" His father would look at him and sigh, but he didn't know how to respond to that.

"Isn't it possible for you to behave yourself so that your grandmother doesn't get angry?"

"I'm sorry." He could only say this.

"All because of you that I get lectured as well! Every time you get grandmother angry, she lectures me too!"

"I'm sorry." He was always apologizing.

Regardless of how hard he tried, the situation never took a turn for the better.

He hadn't understood why it was like this. He could only think that his presence itself made his family unhappy. He had often felt that were he not to exist, his family would be able to live together happily.

(So it really is like this.)

He really wasn't like them.

(I'm not originally a part of their family.)

When he thought back to his family at that moment, he still felt its warmth. He missed his father and his mother, and his grandmother and his brother.

Perhaps if he put more effort into it, everything would change. No one would have to get mad or cry because of him.

(But I can't go back again.)

At this thought, he couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

Yet those weren't homesick tears; they were tears of goodbye.

He knew that he would never again return to that family.

Chapter 3

"Are you awake?"

Hearing Sanshi's voice, Taiki rubbed his eyes, and then suddenly opened them up and stared at the ceiling for a moment.

The white ceiling was made of a milky stone with a design carved upon its entire surface. A bird was cut into each corner, matching intricate flower and grass patterns that surrounded a circular design engraved in the center. Though the ceiling wasn't painted, it had been set with a multitude of different colored stones.

"What bird is that?" he asked as he pointed at one of the birds in the corner.

"That..."

It looked as if Sanshi didn't know how to answer, so he responded with an "Oh!" In truth, he didn't really want to know what bird that was. It was just that because he had suddenly remembered his crying yesterday, he felt a little embarrassed.

"What time is it right now?"

He had made up his mind and turned to look at Sanshi. This was a small room, just smaller than his study at home. A thin, beautiful covering had been laid upon the floor, and pillow-like cushions filled three sides of the walls. The top portion of the white stone walls were inlaid with small stones, forming the image of a tree.

Only one side was without a wall, having layers of curtains instead. The curtains were rolled up now, and Sanshi was standing on that side.

Sanshi puzzlingly tilted her head.

"Well, what am I supposed to do right now? Don't I have to go to school?"

Taiki knew that his life had undergone a tremendous change. He had a feeling that nothing would be like it had been before, being awakened by an alarm clock, and then changing into his uniform, washing his face, eating breakfast, and going

to school.

"What should I do now?"

"You don't have to do anything," said Sanshi as she shook her head. "Would you like to get out of bed?"

Hearing Sanshi ask him this, he took it to mean that he could get up, or he could continue sleeping. He didn't know if these were temporary privileges or if it would always be like this, but he didn't really care either way.

"Yes, I'm getting up."

Taiki sat up in the small room.

When he saw Sanshi stand up, he realized that this small room was a step higher than the ground.

Behind the curtain were doors carved with decorative flower designs, and through the doors he could see another room.

Taiki curiously looked around at the small room he was in and the room outside. Yesterday, he had cried very hard under the tree, so hard that he had felt a little embarrassed, and afterwards he had wearily 27

fallen asleep. Thus, someone had carried him into this room, and it wasn't until this morning that he had gotten a good look at it.

He discovered that this room let people feel at ease, while the other room also looked very comfortable.

The other room appeared not to have any walls, but stone railings instead, and beyond the room were cliffs covered in green moss. The light shining between the cliffs and the building made the moss gleam. The grass and small bushes on the cliffs had grown into the room, and this gave Taiki a fresh feeling.

Sanshi walked in, carrying a water bucket and a ladle. She set the bucket on a table in the corner and called Taiki over. Taiki rolled out of bed and walked over beside Sanshi.

"Good morning."

Sanshi smiled and told Taiki to sit down. He did as she said. He discovered that

he wasn't wearing any clothes, but he didn't care. This was because Sanshi and Youka and all the other nyosen wore styles of clothing that he had never seen before, so he figured that here, things were done differently than usual.

Though he was naked, he didn't feel cold, nor did he feel hot. He thought that it must have been a moderate season.

Sanshi used a very peculiar method to wash his face. Even though this made him feel like a little kid and a little embarrassed, he didn't resist. Sanshi took the bucket outside and brought in a pile of clothes. He felt those clothes looked a lot like the kind his grandmother wore.

When she was dressing him, Sanshi kept her silence. He thought that she sure was a quiet person, but it didn't make him feel awkward. After he was dressed, Sanshi took his hand and lead him to the room next door. He saw a table in the center of the room on which a breakfast had been set, and Youka standing next to it.

"Good morning, Youka."

Youka smiled with joy. "Good morning. Did you sleep well last night?"

"Very well. Did you make this breakfast?"

"No, another person is specially assigned to make your breakfast."

Taiki looked at her with surprise. "Then is there also someone who's specially assigned to sweep?"

"Yes. Well now, please eat before your food gets cold."

I've become the child of a rich family, thought Taiki, though in reality, he didn't actually know people like that.

He raised his hand to receive the long, white chopsticks that Youka handed over to him.

He looked over the food on the table, none of which he recognized, and then he looked at Youka and Sanshi.

"Aren't you guys eating?"

"Sanshi doesn't eat, and I've already eaten."

"But I can't finish this all by myself."

There were many dishes on the table, big and small.

"It's okay if you can't finish everything."

"Is it because I slept late that everyone's already eaten?"



Youka laughed. "Sanshi doesn't need to eat anything, but if she did, her status does not permit her to eat with you."

Taiki tilted his head. Although he had heard of the word "status," he still didn't quite understand what Youka meant.

"Can't you all eat with me? Even if I woke up earlier?"

"No."

Taiki gave the food on the table a confused look. "Why?"

"It's probably a rule here, but..."

"Hm?" Taiki looked up at Youka.

"It would make be feel very strange, because... um..." Youka's head went askew as she searched for the words.

"If you're punishing me for sleeping late by making me eat all alone, then I can understand. But there are other people here and I'm the only one eating. That makes me feel weird. I think the food would taste better if everyone ate together."

"Well," Youka said quietly as she laughed. Then she nodded her head and

called out towards a screen in another corner of the room, "You should all take a short break. Taiki wants to eat with everybody!"

It looked as if there was yet another room behind the screen.

After breakfast, Youka took Taiki to visit the surroundings.

Taiki held Sanshi's hand as he stepped outside and stared dumbfoundedly for a moment.

There were no walls outside of the building, nor doors or windows, and the entrance was shielded by only a screen.

Three flights of stone steps led downward onto a small path, but here, there was no courtyard or gate.

Although a relatively large space existed in front of the steps, it was almost the same as coming out of the building and facing a cliff wall.

The strange crags towered so high above that Taiki could not see the sky without tilting his head back.

The small paths, which extended outward in three directions, were extremely narrow, and standing on one was like standing in a small alley between two tall buildings. Looking back at the building he had just stepped out of, he felt like it had shrunk, as if it was a small house hidden amongst skyscrapers.

"This place is really beyond imagination," Taiki absent-mindedly mumbled to himself. When Youka heard this, she laughed.

"Is it?"

"This question might be a little weird, but what is this place?"

Youka tilted her head to the side. "This is Mt. Hou."

"Oh... I wasn't asking about that. I was talking about..." Taiki wracked his brain for a way to express his doubts. "This place should be pretty far from my house, right? I would like to know just how far is it actually? Where in Japan is this? Or are we not inside the country?"

Even though no one here was speaking a foreign language, everything was so

unusual that he felt like it wasn't Japan.

"Or have I arrived in a fantasy world?" It was like something depicted in a manga where a secret passage inside of a wardrobe leads to a fantasy world.

Youka puzzlingly tilted her head. "I think it should be like that..."

"Oh..." He felt that this was unimaginable. Everything in front of his eyes appeared to be reality, but there was a big gap between this reality and the real world that he recognized.

He thought carefully about what exactly was "reality" and what "reality" could be. The more he thought, the more confused he got, until he let out a heavy sigh and decided never to tackle this problem again.

"Is there flat terrain here?"

"Yes, I'll take you there."

After they took a few steps, Youka turned and looked at the building behind them. "That is Rosen Palace. It is a residence that has been specially prepared for you."

"Then, it's my home?"

"Yes. After you've been living here longer, if you feel there's a better palace, please let us know at any time."

"I can move too?"

Youka laughed a little bit. "Of course you can! You are the master of Houro Palace. You may live wherever you like."

Taiki angled his head. They followed the narrow path and walked to the intersection between a gentle slope and a tunnel.

"Actually...this is something I don't really understand."

"Hm?"

"Houro Palace... that's right here, right?"

"Yes."

"Why would I be the master of this place?"

Taiki felt uncertain. No matter if it was Youka, Sanshi or any of the other nyosen, there were many that were older than he, especially Gyokuyou, who looked even more dignified. He didn't understand why he was the master and not any of the other people. No matter how he looked at it, it didn't make any sense.

Youka had a troubled smile on her face. "Because you are a kirin."

"What is a kirin?"

"A kirin is what is born from that tree from yesterday."

Suddenly, a little light popped into Taiki's head.

"Then, are there others like me?"

"Yes. Besides you, there are eleven others."

"Including me, there are twelve total?"

"Yes. Ren Taiho, whom you met yesterday, is also a kirin."

"Was it that lady who was wearing a bracelet?"

"Yes."

"Then do I have another opportunity to see her?"

Youka shook her head. "Ren Taiho has already gone back."

He thought that this was unfortunate. If he hadn't cried so much yesterday that he cried himself to sleep, perhaps he could have talked to Ren Taiho about many things.

"Then where are the rest of the kirin? Can I meet them?"

Youka laughed. "Everyone has already gone to their respective kingdoms. Perhaps you will run into them after you have also descended."

"Descended?"

"You will choose a ruler, and then you will leave Mt. Hou."

"A ruler? There's a ruler?"

"Yes, and he will become your master."

"Master?"

"A kirin will choose a ruler, and then he will serve the ruler. And it is the duty of us here on Mt. Hou to take care of you before that happens."

So that's how it is, Taiki thought. In the future, he will work as a servant to the ruler. As to which ruler he will work at the side of, only the future can decide. And before that, he will stay on Mt. Hou, which is probably similar to living a pious life.

When he thought all of this through, he finally got a little bit of relief from the uncertainties that had occupied his mind since yesterday.

"But am I qualified enough for such an important job?"

"Well," Youka sigh again and laughed. "Of course you can! Because you are a kirin."

"Is a kirin's job to work at the side of a ruler?"

"Yes."

"Do the other kirin also do this?"

Youka nodded and began to list it out. "There are a total of twelve kingdoms here, and every kingdom has a ruler. There are also twelve kirin. There will always be a kirin at the side of a ruler. This is how things are."

"Oh..."

"But right now, there are only eleven rulers. The ruler of the kingdom situated in the northeast, Tai Kingdom, passed away ten years ago, and a successor has not been chosen yet."

"Then what about the Kirin of Tai Kingdom?"

Youka smiled and looked at Taiki. "Isn't he right here?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you are the Kirin of Tai Kingdom, so that's why we call you Taiki. You will eventually choose a ruler. This is the duty of a kirin."

Taiki blinked his eyes. "Is it right to let me decide such an important thing?"

Youka nodded her head energetically. "This is something only you can decide. ...Ah, this is the mulberry garden."

After not too long a time, Taiki became accustomed to life on Mt. Hou: the unusual clothes, the strange customs, and the vegetarian meals.

Even though there were so many remarkable things, Taiki was still little enough that he didn't fuss over them as an adult might. Especially since he never felt that this way of life was an inconvenience or unsuitable to him, so he very naturally took to it.

If there was just one thing he had trouble adapting to though, it would have to do with the fact that his appearance had changed. The mirrors here did not reflect as clearly as they did back at his old home, but, although he understood this much, he still felt as if his reflection in the mirrors was not the same as it used to be, no matter how he looked at it.

He had never looked at himself very closely in the mirror before, so he wasn't able to say where exactly he was different, but the person in the mirror looked like someone else. He didn't know the reason, but it was as if the change had occurred when he had first gone through the tunnel full of white mist.

Right now he had also felt out clearly his own role on Mt. Hou. The nyosen would take care of the organization of an ordinary day. All he had to do was to get up at a proper time and go to bed at a proper time. When he was awake, he wasn't required to do anything. He just looked around everywhere and asked the nyosen questions, all in order to get basic knowledge about life on Mt. Hou. This was his homework on Mt. Hou.

The nyosen who protected Taiki and carried with them an unmatched love and at the same time an endless concern, could finally stop worrying.

"In the beginning I was really so fretful," said one of the nyosen who were spreading a cloth over jasmine flowers in order to dry it in the sun. The scent of the flowers covered by the cloth became stronger.

"After all, there has never been a kirin that has spent more than ten years away from Mt. Hou."

Youka also lifted a cloth up and gazed at that other nyosen briefly. "It doesn't

matter how many years they've been gone. A kirin is always a kirin. It's not like they'll change."

"I guess you're right."

The other nyosen who were folding cloths all laughed. The cloths had all absorbed the smell of the jasmine flowers and were giving off a clear fragrance.

"But in any case, he did grow up in Hourai, so there are still some things that are strange about him.

Fortunately, none of it makes anyone uncomfortable."

Youka heard this and put her hands on her hips. "How can you say that Taiki is strange!? He's much easier to approach than the kirin who are born and grow up on Mt. Hou! If anything, we should be grateful!"

The nyosen who were folding clothes around the area burst into laughter.

"Youka really favors Taiki!"

"So what!?"

The nyosen completely surrounded the determined Youka and waved the cloths around her feet as if they were performing the ribbon dance, and then with another shout, they spread out.

Teiei watched them and couldn't help but laugh as well. "All right, you girls stop picking on Youka."

The nyosen of Mt. Hou are generally a very lively bunch, but because their work is to take care of kirin, if a kirin is not around, they can get low-spirited as well. Especially in a situation like before when they didn't even know the whereabouts of the kirin, they had all been like balloons that had lost their air.

Of course, there isn't always a kirin on Mt. Hou. In fact, the length of time when they are away is probably greater than when they are present. When the kirin aren't there, the nyosen still draw water, wash clothes or weave fabrics regardless. Everything they do is for themselves, so they do it all without much enthusiasm. However, right now things were not like that! Right now, a kirin was living on Mt. Hou!

Therefore, all the nyosen were also very excited. The nyosen were very fond of

kirin, especially toward this one. In actuality, none of the nyosen really had the liberty to laugh at Youka for favoring Taiki, because of the fifty-some nyosen, almost all of them adored him.

In regard to their poking fun at Youka's favoritism, it was probably a little bit of envy because Taiki and Youka were comparatively closer.

"Youka!" A crisp and clear child's voice came from far away.

All the nyosen stopped what they were doing and turned to look at where the voice had come from.

Just then, Taiki came down a path, running towards the open area.

"Hide me! Hide me!" said Taiki between breaths as he ran toward Youka and hid behind her.

"Taiki just wants to be friends with Youka!"

"That's what I was saying!"

The nyosen laughed and used the cloths they were holding to cover Taiki up. The little body that hid between the jasmine bushes and Youka was completely covered by the cloths in the blink of an eye.

The nyosen giggled. At this time, a shadow appeared on the ground. It was Sanshi coming down from the rocks. The nyosen then all pointed to the eastern path.

"He's over there, Sanshi!"

"Taiki ran that way."

"I almost knocked him over!"

Even though the nyosen tried to trick Sanshi, there was no way she wouldn't be able to find Taiki. She walked directly over to Youka and lifted up the cloth that was covering him. Taiki, who had been hiding inside with neck scrunched up, looked up at her and sighed forcefully. "You still found me."

Still panting heavily, he sat down and hugged Sanshi's foreleg. Sanshi handed the fabric and clothes back to the nyosen and rubbed his head. The nyosen laughed joyously.

"It's impossible to hide from Sanshi."

"I know," said Taiki, as his cheeks turned red. He leaned on Sanshi's foreleg and loosened the collar of his robe. Everyone stifled their laughter and watched him. They all thought that Taiki looked much cuter than any of the kirin who had stayed at Mt. Hou before--It was probably because of their favoritism.

Youka laughed as she stroked Taiki's hair. His hair had grown much longer since he first arrived, and his bangs stuck to his forehead because of his sweat. She gently lifted it aside.

Most kirin had golden hair, but to be accurate, it should be called a mane, rather than hair.

Furthermore, Taiki's mane was the color of steel. This showed that he was not like most kirin, and it caused the nyosen to feel that he was particularly dignified.

"You should go bathe for a bit. It's almost time for dinner."

The status of a kirin is much higher than that of a nyosen, but since they take care of a kirin's everyday life, they feel as if the kirin was their own child. Thus, it follows that the tone of their voice isn't overly respectful. Even the head of the nyosen, Hekika Genkun is like this, so naturally no one can blame them.

"Luckily, there is a lot of clothes here for you to change into. I'll tidy up here and then I'll come find you."

"Okay." Taiki nodded and stood up. "Sanshi, let's go."

The nyosen smiled as they watched Sanshi leave, holding on to Taiki's hand.

"It looks like the one who favors Taiki most is Sanshi!"

"That's right!"

Though they all agreed, none of them felt jealous, because Sanshi and the nyosen were not the same.

Sanshi existed solely for Taiki. Moreover, they were all in a good mood, because anyone who saw Taiki before dinner could eat with him. This was the newest unwritten rule upon Mt. Hou.

After she put away the sun-dried clothes, Youka chose a set that smelled like

sun and jasmine for Taiki and walked to the river. She used a path by a waterfall that ran beside Rosen Palace, and after she turned a corner, she heard crisp and clear laughter.

In the river, Taiki was chasing Sanshi's tail around. One moment, it floated up out of the water, and the next, it sunk back down. Even when he got a hold of her tail, she would lift it up high, sending him back into the water, and then he would surface again with a splash. At this time, he noticed Youka walking towards him and waved to her.

"I've come to see you."

"Thank you."

A nyosen spread a cloth at the side of the river. Taiki walked up onto the blanket on the bank, and another nyosen used the cloth that was hanging at her wrist to wrap around Taiki.

"I can do this myself."

"You never completely dry your upper back, so I think you should still let me do it." After the nyosen said this, she began to wipe down Taiki's body. Even though Taiki felt very embarrassed, all the nyosen wanted to attend to him. And then yet another nyosen helped him put his clothes on, as Youka dried his hair for him.

"I think it's okay already."

"But your hair isn't dry yet."

He took a few tufts of hair in his hand as it rolled off the cloth. His hair had now become an unusual color between black and silver.

"Is my hair too long?"

"Right now, it's still too short!"

Taiki looked Youka with astonishment. "Do I have to keep letting it grow longer? Until it's as long as a girl's?"

"Usually, you let it grow until it stops growing any longer. We'll cut it neatly for you."

"Then I can't cut it myself?"

If you want to be ugly when you transform, then we'll cut it off for you."

"Transform?"

Youka began to comb Taiki's already partially dry hair. "You are a kirin, so you can change into the outer form of a kirin."

"The outer form of a 'kirin'? Do you mean the animal?" *[note: in japanese, the word for giraffe is "kirin." for this next part, just keep in mind that while they're all saying "kirin," taiki is thinking of a giraffe,*

while the nyosen are all thinking of the divine beast.]

"Yes."

Then, Taiki began to contemplate. He already knew that he was a "kirin," but he thought that it was only a name referring to people who were hatched from the fruit of the tree. However, listening to what Youka was saying, it seemed as if that wasn't the case.

"Then am I originally an animal?" This confused him. Even though it's said that humans are a kind of animal, the meaning was not quite the same.

"Yes."

"Then, the person I saw earlier, Ren Taiho, is she one too?"

"Of course."

Taiki's understanding lessened even more.

Was he going to change into a giraffe like a wolfman's transformation? A wolfman's transformation didn't seem that weird, but to turn into a giraffe, his neck would have to stretch so much, so he felt that it was definitely really weird.

--At this time, Taiki had not yet figured out what kind of creature a kirin was.

Teiei had been smiling and watching Taiki and the nyosen when she discovered a look of uncertainty on Taiki's face and suddenly came to a realization.

"Oh, it's because you haven't transformed before, so you don't understand. The hair on your head is not the same as ours. You have a mane."

Taiki nodded. Giraffes definitely had a sort of mane. Teiei motioned for Taiki to move to in front of her and gently touched the center of his forehead, near his

hairline. At this time, Taiki suddenly felt a rush of strong discomfort and anxiety.

"You have a small bump right here."

When he heard Teiei say this, Taiki lifted his hand up and rubbed his forehead. There definitely was a little bump.

"This is a kirin's horn. This horn is extremely important to the kirin. Just then, when I touched your forehead, you should have felt very uncomfortable, right?"

"...A little bit."

"You don't need to be embarrassed about it. A kirin does not like it at all when someone touches their horn. When you get a little older, you'll hate it even more. You won't want to let anyone touch it, not even Sanshi."

After hearing Teiei say these things, Taiki remembered that he had never liked it when someone touched his forehead. Even if it had been his mother, he had still felt like running away.

"Then I'm really a kirin, huh."

"Of course."

From the side, Youka anxiously said, "Just wait until you've transformed. Then you'll understand what we mean."

"How do I transform?"

At this question from Taiki, Youka tilted her head and thought for a little bit. "Yeah... If you had been born and raised on Mt. Hou, then you would inherently know. Because those who are born here remain in kirin form for the first part of their lives. But you were born in Hourai, so you've been in human form..."

Youka wasn't very clear on matters concerning Hourai, but because there had been kirin before who had come back from Hourai, she had heard a few things.

"Does changing into a kirin feel uncomfortable?"

"There are no kirin who dislike transforming, so I don't think it's uncomfortable."

"Don't you think it's really weird?"

"Not at all." After Youka said this, she started to comb Taiki's hair with her

fingers again. "You aren't like most kirin. Most kirin have manes are gold, like Ren Taiho's. You are a kokki, which I've heard are very rare! You need to hurry and let me see you after your transformation! The color of your mane is so pretty, you'll definitely look even better after you've turned into a kirin."

"But I can't think of a way to transform."

"I think..." Youka sighed. "I can't think of a way either. After all, I'm not a kirin, and I've never transformed. If we get a chance, we'll ask Genkun!"

"Okay..."

Teiei looked at Taiki, who was not yet completely at ease, and could not help but silently crease her brow. Having lived in the other world for ten long years, would Taiki actually be able to transform without any problems? Though it's said that there has never been a kirin who was not able to transform, if Taiki were to be the first to set the precedent, it would be too unfortunate.

Gyokuyou may have an answer to this question, but she wasn't someone one could find just by wanting to find her. However, Taiki was running out of time! Teiei's line of sight moved away from Taiki and Youka, who were joking with each other, as she looked up anxiously at the already darkening sky.

Luckily, the spring equinox had already passed, but when the summer solstice arrived, there would definitely be people climbing the mountain.

Is a kirin who cannot transform able to choose a ruler?

Chapter 4

Taiki absent-mindedly wandered around the small paths, not looking at where he was going at all. In addition, Taiki was still essentially unfamiliar with the roads outside of Rosen Palace. However, since Sanshi was with him, he didn't worry about getting lost.

He was walking aimlessly like this for a while when he suddenly saw a gate in front of him, obstructing the path. The door was shut tightly, preventing Taiki from going any further.

This was the outer perimeter of Houro Palace. It probably took him a while to walk here from Rosen Palace, which meant that he had already been lost in thought for a long time.

"..." Taiki sighed. The bolt for the gate was on this side, so it would have been easy to open the gate, had he wanted to. However, the nyosen had told him before that he absolutely could not take one step out of this gate.

But Taiki didn't feel like heading back, so he turned around and raised his arms toward Sanshi, who had been quietly following him.

"Sanshi, can you take me up there?"

Sanshi nodded her head and picked Taiki up. At Taiki's current age, it wouldn't be easy for most women to lift him, but ever since he returned to Mt. Hou, he was no longer as heavy as he looked on the outside. Since he now had an immortal body, he was extremely light, so Sanshi didn't expend the slightest amount of energy to pick him up. Only two or three jumps and she arrived at the top of a cliff.

Looking down from the top, Houro Palace looked like a maze. The roofs of the palace structures that were scattered everywhere reflected a greenish light. At the edge of the maze there stood a snow-white tree, which at that moment was bathed in sunlight.

Taiki held on to Sanshi as he stared in the direction of the tree.

Gazing at it from above, Houro Palace appeared to be in the shape of a fan.

The Shashinboku was situated beside a cliff wall on the terrace furthest east, which was also the eastern boundary of the palace.

The top of the enormous, strangely-shaped crag could not be seen, and the bottom extended into a gorge of an unknown depth. Most people could not walk its complex, intertwining terrain.

On the inner side of the terrace, there was a gradual slope, the area of which was wider the closer it got.

At some point, it diverged into a countless number of small paths, and at another point it converged into one path. This path was cut off firmly by the gate that Taiki had just seen at the end of the maze.

A steep mountain peak stood on the northern side of the maze. The cliff wall of the steep mountain, as well as the soaring peak that extended past the clouds included no easy way to climb, even for Sanshi.

The eastern and northern sides were protected by towering cliff walls, so those who wanted to visit Houro Palace must first enter through that gate, and then walk the correct route through the maze in order to reach their destination.

Taiki left Sanshi's embrace and, standing on the crag, he looked back behind him.

On the southern and eastern sides outside of the maze of the palace, the confusing terrain continued.

The inside and outside of the maze formed a single gigantic labyrinth. Even with Taiki looking at it from above, he wasn't clear where the border between the two actually was.

However, the terrain on the outside did look slightly simpler than that of the inside. The small paths were wider and the open areas were much bigger. If someone walking in the middle of it mastered the direction of the sun, they should be able to reach Houro Palace.

Taiki was thinking these things as he looked around, when he saw an emerald green glimmer coming from somewhere a far distance down the mountain.

"Sanshi, what's over there?" Taiki asked as he pointed. Sanshi looked in that

direction with her round eyes.

"Hoto Palace..."

"There are palaces outside of the gate?"

Sanshi nodded. "Outer palaces."

"Oh..."

In this way, Taiki was looking at the maze, when a strong gust of wind blew at them. He looked around and saw no oceans around, but the wind had carried with it the smell of the sea.

"What's wrong?" Sanshi couldn't help but ask, seeing Taiki stare into the distance as he stood in the wind. Sanshi did not speak up to ask him questions very often, so that meant that he appeared to be completely lost in thought.

"Sanshi, did you have to transform in order to look like you do now? Or were you born this way?"

Sanshi gently stroked his head. "Nyokai cannot transform. Transformation requires a special power in order to perform."

"Oh..."

"Changing your outward appearance is not a very easy thing to do. There are youma that are capable of it, but their magical powers are extremely strong. Even monarchs may not be able to control them."

"Youma?"

"They are creatures that possess supernatural powers and do not listen to the will of the heavens."

"Are nyokai also youma?"

Sanshi shook her head. "Nyokai are creatures that are between humans and youju, called nin'you or youjin. The special ones born on Mt. Hou are called nyokai."

"Then... are kirin considered youju?"

Sanshi revealed to Taiki an expression that no one else had ever had a chance to see. "Kirin definitely possess powers, but we don't call kirin by the name

youju. Kirin are shinju, divine beasts."

"Why?"

"Because in this world, only gods and monarchs are nobler than the kirin. More particularly, only the Taiou, Lady Seioubo and Tentei hold a higher status than you."

"I...don't quite understand."

Sanshi brushed his hair. "Then just remember that since Seioubo and Tentei don't usually come down from the Heavens, you will probably never have a chance to meet them. Thus, the only one who is nobler than you is the Taiou."

"Then what about everyone else? Doesn't Lady Gyokuyou have a higher status than me?"

"If you can call her by the name Gyokuyou, that means that you and she share the same status. It is only etiquette that requires you address her as Lady."

"This is so complicated."

"Is it very complicated?"

"Yes." Taiki lowered his head to look at the scenery below his feet. After standing in the wind for a moment, he asked Sanshi another question.

"What do I need to do...to be able to transform?"

Sanshi looked at the depressed expression on Taiki's face. "That is an ability that you were born with..."

"When the time comes, you will do it naturally."

"Really...?" Taiki lowered his eyelids. Recently, a lot of the nyosen had told him to quickly transform into a black kirin so that they could experience something new. Taiki knew that the nyosen all adored him, so that he could satisfy their hopes. However, he had no idea as to how he would do it.

"You don't need to worry... you just need to live your days with happiness."

"Okay..." Taiki leaned his head on Sanshi's wrist.

It was at this moment that he spotted two figures on a small path in the vicinity of Hoto Palace.

"Sanshi, there are people over there."

Sanshi looked over toward Hoto Palace and nodded her head. "It's probably a couple nyosen who've gone to burn some incense. They're bringing flowers and sticks of incense to the altar in Hoto Palace."

"Sanshi, let's return with the nyosen."

Taiki had no way to get himself down to the path from the top of the crag, so he prepared himself for Sanshi to carry him down. At this time, Sanshi suddenly jerked her head fiercely.

"What's wrong?"

In the second that it took Taiki to ask this question, Sanshi's outline looked like it had been sucked into a little crack and disappeared.

"Sanshi?"

"Stay where you are and don't move."

He only heard Sanshi's voice--her voice came from beside him, full of a tense feeling, but he couldn't see her.

Taiki stood on the crag. Hearing such a nervous tone, as well as an unimaginably monstrous ferocity develop in her voice, he guessed that something was definitely out of the ordinary.

Taiki carefully looked around, not daring to breathe too loudly. He grabbed onto the cliffside, and stretched his neck out to see if he could find Sanshi's figure. At this time something suddenly brushed past his neck.

"Huh...?"

He felt something fly towards him and graze his cheek. And then, something else wrapped itself around his hands, with which he had been holding on to the cliffside. Suddenly, his hands were tugged by a strong force and it flung his body over the side of the rock face.

In that second, Taiki saw that his hands were bound by a long chain.

He began to fall.

--Someone was pulling him off the crag.

"I've got you!"

Taiki was startled awake by a loud and coarse voice.

He suddenly remembered that he had fallen off of the crag and into the area beyond the boundary where the nyosen had told him never to cross. When he tried to think back to why he had fallen, he heard another deep shouting. He was laying on the ground and turned to see where the voice came from, when he saw a few droplets of blood spray thru the air.

"It looks like blood..." In the moment this thought floated into his mind, it was as if his body temperature had dropped, and he was suddenly unable to move his body.

He remembered a peculiarity that he had almost forgotten after he had arrived at Mt. Hou.

--I'm afraid of blood!

Even when it was blood from his own injury, he almost couldn't stand it. If it was someone else's blood coming out of their wound, he would get so scared that he couldn't breathe.

He tried to close his eyes, but even his eyelids wouldn't listen to his commands. It was as if he had forgotten to take a breath, and all he could feel was the urgent beating of his heart. He had almost reached his limit. The sight of the blood spray kept replaying itself deep inside his pupil, which had already lost focus.

(I was originally standing on top of the crag!)

Then something had bound his hands and dragged him down. He felt that that thing was still wrapped around his hands now, like it was a chain of thorns.

He knew that he had fallen off the crag.

He was now laying on the ground which was piled full of rocks, with his body in an unnatural position.

He was on his back with stones under him.

Having fallen from such a high place into the bottom of a valley, and passing by so many sharp rocks, logic dictates that he must have been wounded. However,

right now Taiki was not clear on whether or not he had been injured, or if through a miracle, he was only lightly hurt.

He could only feel the strong beating of his heart. His hands and feet were already so cold he could not move them, and he was dizzy as if he had a fever. He couldn't wipe the bright red pigment of blood away. It occupied his mind and was so vivid that there was no way for him to understand what was going on in front of him.

He wanted to shake his head forcefully so that he might wake up a little bit, however he couldn't even blink his eyes. Was his inability to move due to an injury? Or was it because he had just seen droplets of blood? What was actually going on right now?

"You monster!" He heard a coarse voice calling out, and finally understood what it was that he was looking at.

It was a man. He was a big man who was holding a sword in his hands.

And that sword was pointed at Sanshi!

"I'm not going to be beaten by a nin'you! Go the hell back to the Yellow Sea!"

He raised the sword and sliced it down quickly.

(Sanshi!)

He wanted to shout, but he couldn't make any sounds.

The edge of the blade made an arc in the air, brushing past Sanshi's body. Sanshi had reached out in an attempt to grab a hold of his throat.

The tips of her white fingers had been stained red. In the next moment, Sanshi's wrist sprayed fresh blood as the edge of the sword crossed it.

(Stop!)

He shut his eyes tightly, secretly wishing that he wouldn't have to open them again. He was already not sure if he was still breathing or if his heart was still beating.

He didn't want to open his eyes, but all of a sudden a strong force tugged at his hands, and he opened his eyes in shock. Before he was clear on what had

happened, he had already rolled off the rocks.

His back was struck and just as he wanted to cry out, his wrists were being tugged again. He looked up only to see his two wrists being pulled into the air. Around his wrists was a thin chain that was connected all the way to the man's hand that wasn't holding the sword. Whenever the man moved a little, a sharp pain would occur in his shoulders and elbows as if they were being dislocated. He was dragged forward on top of a crag in this way, with the upper portion of his body rubbing against the top of the stones, causing him a piercing pain.

"Who are you?"

The man was pointing his sword at Sanshi as he looked at Taiki. He looked very angry.

"Why is your hair like this?" The tone of the man's voice sounded like he was blaming him, but Taiki didn't know how he should reply.

Sanshi jumped in front of the man again. He swung the sword at her and cut her leg. Bright red spots sprayed from Sanshi's body once again.

The man glared at Taiki again and twisted his long, cruel face as he yelled at him loudly.

"Boy, you aren't a kirin?"

Kirin? Of course he was a kirin. Everyone had said so.

Could he answer him like this?

But right now, he was more worried about Sanshi!

Sanshi...

(Ah... She's bled so much...)

Whenever the man moved, Taiki's wrists would be jerked at. It was so painful, he felt like his whole body was going to be ripped apart.

"Damn it! And I thought you were a kirin. I spent all this time and I end up with a little brat and a nin'you following me!"

Sanshi lunged at the man again, but met only his sword as he swung it at her. More blood droplets splattered onto the ground. Sanshi backed up as the man

moved forward a few steps, causing Taiki to be dragged along again, the sharp rocks scratching up his body.

"How did a nin'you like you get into Mt. Hou? Let me teach you a thing or two!"



He cut Sanshi again with the point of the blade, which hit the rocks.

(Sanshi...)

Sanshi's white body was already spotted with blood.

(Sanshi, run away...)

He really wanted to call this out, but he could not say anything...

"Stop this immediately!"

Suddenly hearing a loud sharp voice, Taiki opened his eyes.

"How...could this happen!?"

"Taiki!"

He heard a mass of footsteps running in his direction as pale-faced nyosen entered his line of sight.

"This...is too much! Taiki!"

When the nyosen ran over and reached out their hands, Taiki broke out in tears. Warm hands picked him up and he smelled the pleasant fragrance of a nyosen, making him feel like he could sleep forever.

"What is going on here? Sanshi, stop!"

"Is she your pet dog? Quickly, take her away!"

"You're the one who should go away, you horrible person!"

Hearing a loud shouting, Taiki lifted up his head.

It had been Teiei's voice. This was the first time he had seen her so agitated. The man was also looking at her with surprise, while Sanshi hatefully glowered at the man.

"Sanshi, that's enough. If you bleed any more you won't be able to be by Taiki's side. If you don't want that to happen, then you should cool down a little bit."

After saying this to Sanshi, Teiei glared at the man.

"How dare you come to Mt. Hou and treat Taiki in this vulgar manner!"

"Taiki?" The man looked at the child who was being tightly embraced by a nyosen.

"You're saying that this brat... no, this child is Taiki?"

"Correct! Since ancient times, the only children that appear on Mt. Hou are the Mt. Hou Kou. And you perform these treacherous actions upon Mt. Hou Kou! I would like to hear an explanation now."

An expression of joy piled upon the man's entire face.

"Taiki! I can't believe I caught him." After saying this, he strode forward a step.

Teiei extended her hand to block him. "What is your answer? You are not to get one step closer to Mt. Hou Kou! I want to hear your explanation first."

"I've caught Taiki! It was me!"

"You still won't answer me? Is it possible that you want to experience the power of the nyosen?"

The man had a hateful grin upon his face. "I am the Shikou Daibu of the Bakou in Tai Kingdom. I am called Goson. I heard that the kirin had returned to Mt. Hou, so I came."

"Hoto Palace has not permitted anyone by the name of Goson to climb the

mountain."

"Ah... Regarding this, I am very sorry. I was too eager to see Houro Palace, and consequently, I did not go to Hoto Palace beforehand to tell them. However, I've caught the kirin!"

"You've caught him? What do you mean by 'caught him'?"

The man widened his eyes. "I've caught the kirin. Though my hasty rush up the mountain is my mistake, for which I apologize, but I hope that you can grant Taiki to me."

After saying this, the man laughed. "I am the King of Tai!"

Taiki felt the body of the nyosen who was embracing him begin to shake with anger. And as if it had been contagious, Teiei's shoulders also started to shake a little.

"You ignorant fool!"

Hearing Teiei's angry yell, the man couldn't help but take a half-step back.

"Who would have thought that the Bakou of Tai Kingdom would actually have allowed such a foolish person to become the Shikou Daibu!"

The man retreated another half-step backward.

"What did you think Taiki was? Did you think that the honorable Mt. Hou Kou was the same as the youju that you catch in the Yellow Sea? Don't kid yourself! You, the King of Tai? I advise you to get off this mountain before lightning strikes you as a punishment from the Heavens!"

"But..."

"Be quiet! If more nonsense comes out of your mouth, even if the Heavens don't punish you, I will tear you into pieces!"

The man could no longer speak, his mouth simply opening and closing.

The nyosen who was holding Taiki stood up and carefully helped Taiki remove the chain on his wrists.

She gently rubbed the skin where the chain had bound Taiki's wrists, and then she stroked his cheek and brushed his hair. Then she spoke to Taiki, who was

near tears again.

"This makes me so angry. You must have been so scared! I am going to take you back to the palace now."

"But Sanshi..." He looked at Sanshi, who was standing quietly to one side. The nyosen shook her head.

"Not yet. Don't worry about her right now."

Though he still wasn't clear on what had happened, he did know that Sanshi was injured for the sake of protecting him.

He wanted to know if her wounds were serious and to thank her and treat her wounds, but just looking at her with blood all over her body, made his heart feel like it was being squeezed. Since Sanshi's body gave off a strong smell of blood, no matter what, he would not be able to be close to her.

He carried a mood that was hard to get over as he let the nyosen pick him up. His whole body ached, and as a result, he really wanted to cry before the nyosen had even walked one step.

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After they entered the big gate, he saw Youka.

All the nyosen who ran over to him saw Taiki's appearance and cried out. The nyosen who was carrying him explained what had happened to them, and after they heard, they rushed outside.

"Really...this is too much!" said Youka, as she stared angrily out the gate. Then she anxiously reached her hands to Taiki.

"This is really unfortunate. You must have been so scared. Are you all right?"

"Sanshi..."

Youka nodded her head in understanding.

"Sanshi's fine. Although a nyokai's wounds might look very serious, they will heal very quickly. But did you get hurt?"

"I don't know."

"At any rate, we should return to the palace first. Sanshi will clean her body

before she comes back, so you don't need to worry."

Taiki finally nodded his head.

"You don't need to be so sad. There was nothing you could do. Kirin have always been creatures that feared blood. Even to the point that some kirin will get sick when they just smell blood!"

"Really...? The other kirin are like this too?"

"Yes, so you don't need to feel so ashamed. After Sanshi comes back, I'll help treat her wounds."

"Okay..."

Taiki reached his hand out to Youka, and Youka picked him up.

Afterwards, all the nyosen who had come rushing argued about who would carry him back, all along the road to Rosen Palace.

After they got back to his bedroom at Rosen Palace, Youka brought a big basin of medicinal water and let Taiki soak in it.

She carefully checked Taiki's body for injuries and then delicately washed his body as she listened to him tell her about what had happened to him. She listened and silently cursed the foolish man several times.

"Do you know what was actually going on?" Taiki still didn't quite understand the cause of the occurrence.

Youka smiled at the puzzled and anxious Taiki. "It was because I was too careless, thinking that since the spring equinox had passed, everything would be fine... Please forgive me for my mistake."

"You didn't make a mistake."

"No, I should have been more clear with you. Luckily, you didn't get any serious injuries. When you fell off the crag, I'm certain it was Sanshi that caught you. After she comes back, you need to properly show her your appreciation."

"Yes..."

"Also, please promise me that you will never, even if Sanshi is with you, cross the big gate of Houro Palace without a nyosen accompanying you. No, please

promise me not even to get near to the big gate."

"I won't go out there."

Hearing Taiki say this, Youka nodded her head. And then after Taiki got out of the bath, she wrapped him up with the towel in her hand.

Youka carried Taiki to his bed and lightly wiped his body clean.

"...The kirin will choose a ruler."

"How is the ruler chosen? Shouldn't the child of the king succeed him?"

"No, the kirin chooses him."

"I don't understand..."

"Actually, I'm not too clear on it either. After all, I'm not a kirin. But it's probably like this: the ruler is decided by Tentei, who holds the highest status in the Heavens. After he compares the natures of many people, he chooses the person who most fit to be the ruler."

"Oh..."

"And then Tentei will inform the kirin of his choice... Oh, he doesn't just use his mouth to tell the kirin! It's just that when the kirin meets the person who should become the ruler, he will know naturally that it is him, because the kirin will receive a revelation."

"What's a revelation?"

"That's something only a kirin knows. If you are a kirin, it is certain that you will be able to feel the revelation. Regardless of how small the kirin is, they can definitely all choose a ruler."

"...Okay."

"After a little while, those who hope to become the ruler will climb Mt. Hou in droves. That is how they will be able to meet you, so that you can choose a ruler out of them."

"Just like...that guy today?"

Youka nodded. She put down the cloth she had been using to dry Taiki's hair and began to help him put on his undergarments.

"Yes. A lot of people will come! Then... It'll probably be around the summer solstice."

"Why the summer solstice?"

"Because Mt. Hou is located in the center of the Yellow Sea. Ordinarily, people aren't allowed into the Yellow Sea. However, there are four gates upon the periphery of the Yellow Sea. Once they go through those gates, they will have entered the Yellow Sea. Also, the four gates will open alternately at the spring and fall equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices."

The day the gate opens is called Ankou Day. Outside of Ankou Day, these four gates are so closely protected that not even a drop of water can get through.

"They only open for one day?"

"Right, from noon on the day of, to noon on the day after. The spring equinox occurred not long after you had just arrived, and I thought that even if those people had wanted to climb the mountain, they probably wouldn't have had enough time. I didn't think it could happen, so I lowered my guard. Please forgive my error."

"That's okay."

"That man today probably rushed here to make it in time. However, when the summer solstice arrives, then there really will be many people coming to climb the mountain."

"Oh..."

"To get from any of the four gates to here, no matter how fast they are, it takes half a month. Thus, once they enter a gate, they aren't able to leave until the next time a gate opens. Also, those who wish to climb Mt. Hou will set up camp in the area around Hoto Palace, and they will stay there until the day they can leave. Although there are many youma and youju in the Yellow Sea, they aren't able to enter Mt. Hou, so staying there is very safe. When the time comes, there will be so many people that the commotion will seem like a small town!"

"That many people? Then will I really know who the ruler is?"

"You don't need to worry. You will gain a revelation, so you will certainly know."

Regardless of how great a person looks, if you don't receive the revelation, then they aren't the ruler."

"Okay..."

"However, among those, there will still be people like that idiot today, who think that they just need to use their savage strength to capture the kirin or force the kirin to bow down to them in order to make them king."

"So is that why Houro Palace was built at the end of a maze?"

"Probably. Because when some people hear that a kirin has been born, they will want to come and take the kirin."

"Oh..."

"When you are allowed outside of the gate, naturally we will take you outside, so until that time, you must not run out there by yourself. Even when you are inside the gates, you still need to be careful."

"I know."

Youka smiled and rubbed Taiki's head. "When the kirin receives the revelation, he will bow in front of the ruler.

Besides the ruler, the kirin will absolutely not bow down to anyone else. Even in the shrines of Tentei and Seioubou, only kirin are allowed to not bow down in respect."

"Wow..."

"And then the kirin will vow never to abandon the ruler, never to disobey his royal command, and pledge his loyalty to the ruler."

"Okay."

"After the ruler vocally agrees, the kirin will press his forehead, or I should say his horn, against the feet of the ruler. Thereupon, that person formally becomes the ruler. The person you choose will be called Taiou, which is what the ruler of Tai Kingdom is called. And from then on, you will be called Tai Taiho."

"This is so complicated!"

Seeing Taiki's sour face, Youka laughed.

"Is it? After you choose a ruler, you will ascended to a place even higher than Mt. Hou. There sits the shrine of Seioubo, where you will take the Taiou."

"How do I take him up there? Even Sanshi can't go up there."

Youka laughed even more happily.

"At that time, a road will naturally appear. You will go up and enter the shrine to receive the Tenchoku.

Afterwards, you will go down to the Kingdom of Tai. You shouldn't ask me what the Tenchoku is though, because this is something only kirin and rulers know about."

"Okay."

"When it comes time, a path of beautiful clouds will appear from Mt. Hou straight to the Kingdom of Tai, and you will ride the clouds all the way down to Tai Kingdom."

"And then?"

"And then?" Youka looked at Taiki and saw only Taiki's anxious face.

"And then what happens? Am I going to live in Tai Kingdom forever?"

"Of course."

"Then will I never see you again?" Taiki looked like he was about to cry. "What about Sanshi? And Teiei? And the rest of the nyosen?"

"Well," Youka sighed. She hugged Taiki, who was sitting on the bedding. "Yes... I suppose we may never have another chance to meet. However, Sanshi will always stay by your side, forever and ever."

"Do I have to choose a ruler?"

"Choosing a ruler is your most important duty!"

Seeing Taiki hugging her tightly with his little hands, Youka gently stroked his back.

"You must become an exceptional kirin and choose a great ruler! We will all care about you from far away at Mt. Hou."

Mt. Hou was a place to bring up kirin, so once a kirin leaves Mt. Hou, on principle, they cannot come back. After all, the nyosen of Mt. Hou need to concentrate on taking care of the newly born kirin. But Taiki didn't need to know these things right now.

"Our only hope is that you can become a spectacular kirin and fulfill your duties without any problems."

Taiki nodded.

--Although, it was very forced.

Finally, relative to the calendar, summer was getting closer and closer.

Relative to the calendar because there were no so-called seasons on Mt. Hou.

After a page was turned, it would be the summer solstice. On that day, the Reikon Gate on the southwestern side of the Yellow Sea would open.

"Taiki, I'll brush your hair into a topknot," said Teiei to Taiki. Because she saw that as Taiki was gathering stones from the river, he would constantly be pulling his hair out of the water.

"Okay," said Taiki as he sat down on the crag next to the river. Teiei unfastened the thin rope that was at her waist and began to tie a topknot. Taiki's neatly trimmed head of steel-colored hair had already grown down to his back, but then putting it up into a topknot made it feel like it was still too short.

"Can I trim my bangs?"

"If you must trim them, we will do it for you. However, if you end up regretting it, we won't sympathize."

"This length should already be long enough, shouldn't it?"

Hearing Taiki say this with such apprehension, Teiei couldn't help but laugh.

"When you transform into a kirin, your hair won't be this long. It will become a length that is just right. It looks like your hair is still growing, so that means that it's not yet long enough."

"If only I could transform now and see if it's long enough or not."

"That's not necessary. We are all very experienced! Your topknot is finished."

Teiei squinted and watched as Taiki jumped back into the water with a plop.

"Have you heard the story of Sairin?"

"Sairin? Nope."

"A long time ago, there was a kirin who liked to look pretty, called Sairin."

"That's a woman because she has Rin in her name, right?"

"Right. Sairin was always very envious of the nyosen's hairstyle, so she would always complain that she wanted the nyosen to brush her hair into a topknot."

"And then she got a topknot with a hairpin, like you?"

Teiei nodded as she was sewing clothes. "Right. We combed her hair with pomade and tied it up into a tight topknot, and then we inserted all sorts of hairpins. Unexpectedly, when evening came and she transformed in order to get back to the palace, her mane was still bound in a topknot and there was no way for her to straighten her neck, so it became crooked."

Taiki giggled.

"That must have hurt."

"Right. So you have to be careful. If you transform with your hair in a topknot, it will hurt a lot."

"All right!"

Taiki and Teiei both laughed. Following that, Teiei lowered her head to look at the clothes beside her hand.

Ever since that incident with that Goson from Ba Province, Taiki always had at least two or three nyosen by his side. Because when the nyokai encounters urgent situations, the only thought that goes through her mind is to protect Taiki, sometimes she will injure herself needlessly and cause injury to Taiki.

Just like on that day, after Sanshi had cleaned her body once, she had still not been able to completely wash off the smell of blood. Taiki didn't tell the nyosen and let Sanshi be by him until he fell asleep like in the past. As a result, he had gotten a fever by the next day.

(It would be better if Taiki had shirei...)

Teiei quietly thought to herself.

Relying only on Sanshi to protect Taiki isn't enough.

At times like these, she felt like the ten years that Taiki had been away from Mt. Hou was really too long a time.

The Yellow Sea around the Five Mountains was a habitat for youma, and ordinarily, a kirin would use his spare time to walk along the periphery of the Yellow Sea and tame youma, turning them into his shirei.

At first he would find a few smaller youma at the foot of the Five Mountains to test out his skill and tame them.

(However, Taiki's already run out of time...)

Moreover, Taiki also didn't know how to tame youma, and there was no way Teiei could teach him, because this should have been an instinctual skill that a kirin was born with.

(If only he had come back five years earlier.)

Kirin are born in beast form and in their first five years, do not change their appearance, since they don't have a horn yet. They don't know how to speak and don't quite understand everything a nyosen says, like a small bird that has just hatched.

However, newly hatched birds can't fly, but kirin already know how to gallop through the air when they are born. Small kirin can only follow their nyokai around, wandering blithely through the Five Mountains, as they search for youma and tame them for their own amusement. Small kirin grow up only drinking their nyokai's milk, so they build up a resistance to injury and blood.

Though it is a little different for every kirin, they begin to transform every now and then to human form and speak the human language after an average of about five years. After another period of time, their transformations will last longer, until one day the sharp tips of their horns will emerge from their foreheads.

That is also the time it stops nursing, and from then on, they can show their complete human forms.

Thus, from the time they stop nursing, most kirin just know naturally how to transform and how to tame youma, and they don't need anyone to teach them. Though they are not considered fully grown until their horns are completely developed, they basically already possess all the skill that a kirin should have.

Also, it isn't until this time that the flag can be raised.

After a kirin stops nursing, their native kingdom--although they weren't really born in that kingdom, most people refer to it as such--receives news of this event, and every shrine in the kingdom raises a Kirin Flag. This meant that there was a kirin on Mt. Hou who was already prepared to choose a ruler. After all those that hope to be the ruler see the raised flag, they then climb the mountain in throngs.

Teiei sighed.

Taiki was no longer a small kirin. On the day that he had returned to Mt. Hou, his native kingdom, Tai Kingdom had raised the Kirin Flag. There was no way to tell the people now that Taiki was not yet ready.

He had to choose a ruler. At this point, Taiki should already know how to transform, and he should already have shirei.

"What's the matter?"

Taiki asked Teiei this. He may have heard Teiei sighing. Teiei shook her head at Taiki's curious face.

It would be better if she didn't say anything. Or else it might be like the matter concerning his transformation, causing Taiki to worry to himself. After all, this was something that no one could teach him.

It wasn't easy to cheer Taiki up, and she didn't want to make him depressed and unhappy again.

Ever since Taiki had heard Youka say that after he chooses a ruler, he wouldn't be able to return to Mt. Hou, he had been in low spirits. The closer the summer solstice got, the more he moped, making the nyosen who saw him feel all anxious inside.

He was like this up until he had heard that there wasn't necessarily a real ruler

among the people who will climb the mountain during the summer solstice, and that some kirin live on Mt. Hou for several years and wait many seasons before they finally find a ruler. Then, he recovered the cheerfulness of his former days again.

"We need to think of a way to take advantage of the time we have now..."

Fortunately, there were no people at Hoto Palace right now. It seemed that the only person to make it for the Ankou Day of the spring equinox was that Goson.

Afterwards, all the nyosen had reproached Goson, and they also didn't give him any food or water before chasing him off the mountain. In order to get back to the Kingdom of Tai, he had to wait at the Reikon Gate for the next Ankou Day before the gate would open. However, setting up camp there, he had to avoid the attacks of the youma and youju, which was not an easy thing to do. Even though he would probably be able to survive, when Ankou Day arrives and the crowds enter the Reikon Gate to climb the mountain, he will definitely become a laughingstock. However, Teiei did not feel sympathy for him at all.

But the current situation could only be kept until the summer solstice. After that day passes, Hoto Palace will be filled with a multitude of people. Perhaps they could make the most of their time by taking Taiki to the Yellow Sea and letting him scuffle with the small youma, and possibly then he would be able to figure out how to tame youma. But then again, compared to most small kirin, Taiki had already lost the tenacity of an animal born in the wild, so Teiei was very afraid that something unexpected would happen that they would not be able to control.

"Teiei, do you have something on your mind?"

Hearing a voice, Teiei lifted her head and saw Taiki looking at her with concern.

"No..."

"Are you worrying about me?"

Teiei gently laughed. Taiki already knew that everything that a nyosen would be anxious about had to do with the kirin. This caused Teiei both to be happy that Taiki was smart and clever, and to adore that he was so perceptive he was

able to sense what was in her heart.

"How could that be!?"

"But..."

"I've just been sewing so much that I'm feeling a little restless. I'm telling you, I don't like doing needlework at all!"

"Do you want me to help?"

"Ah! I must really thank you, but if you did sew better than me, then I would be too embarrassed. Don't worry about about and go play!"

Teiei laughed and rubbed Taiki's head, as she secretly thought, "If only we could let Taiki meet other kirin, then things would be better."

A kirin would be able to teach Taiki all the things that the nyosen and Sanshi could not.

Chapter 5

Lady Gyokuyou!" called out Taiki suddenly, just as he finished his lunch at Rosen Palace.

Rosen Palace held a total of five rooms, and Gyokuyou entered the center room with a golden-haired young man behind her. Seeing this scene, the bowing Teiei couldn't help but secretly admire Gyokuyou. (Genkun had already thought of this.) "It hasn't been long since the last time I saw you, but you've already grown so much."

Gyokuyou smiled as she stroked Taiki's hair.

"Your mane has grown long. Are your days here good?"

"Very good," replied Taiki to Gyokuyou, as his eyes drifted over to the young man behind her. Other than that time he encountered Goson, this was the first time he had seen a man on Mt. Hou, so he was very curious.

"This is Kei Taiho, Keiki."

Taiki's eyes widened. "Is he a kirin too?"

Gyokuyou nodded.

Taiki looked up at the expressionless Keiki, who nodded at Taiki.

Even though he looked like he was very uninterested, Taiki was still very happy to meet another kirin.

After all, Taiki knew that he was a kirin, but he still wasn't sure what kind of a creature a kirin actually was.

Gyokuyou looked at the surrounding nyosen.

"Rosen Palace looks very busy."

Youka hurriedly lowered her head and replied, "I'm sorry. Since Taiki doesn't like to eat alone..."

Gyokuyou heard this and laughed.

"Very good. Taiki is the master of Mt. Hou right now, so you should listen to his

instructions."

"Yes."

"Kei Taiho will stay here for a little while. You should prepare for this."

"Yes."

After watching the nyosen bow and leave, Gyokuyou took Taiki's hand.

"I heard that a boorish person intruded upon this palace. What a terrible misfortune! You didn't get injured, did you?"

"No."

"Oh, good." Gyokuyou smiled and invited Taiki and Keiki to sit. "Kei Taiho stayed upon Mt. Hou previous to you."

"Really?" Taiki looked at Keiki, but Keiki simply gave him a quick affirmative glance.

"You were both born on Mt. Hou, just like brothers. Kei Taiho will stay on Mt. Hou for a little while, so you can treat him as your older brother. Anything you don't understand, just ask him."

"Okay." Taiki smiled at Keiki. "Kei Taiho, have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Yes, I've eaten."

"Do you want to drink some tea?"

"Don't trouble yourself."

Taiki tilted his head a little bit. "Kei Taiho, which palace are you going to live in?"

"I used to live at Shiren Palace."

"Do you want to go over there now? Can I come walk with you?"

"All right."

Seeing Keiki stand up, Taiki stood up as well. As he was about to leave with Keiki, he turned to look at Gyokuyou.

"Lady Gyokuyou, are you going to stay here as well? Or do you have other things to do?"

Gyokuyou smiled. "I don't have anything to do. If you'll agree to it, I can eat dinner with you."

"Okay!"

Taiki smiled happily and then quickly chased after Keiki. Gyokuyou and the nyosen laughed as they watched him run outside. When they couldn't see their figures anymore, Teiei timidly spoke. "I would like to ask a question that may be improper..."

"You may ask it."

"I know it is impolite to say this, but Kei Taiho isn't someone who is easy to become close to. He and Taiki..."

She was not finished when Gyokuyou gave a laugh. "Kei Taiho is definitely someone who is hard to approach."

Teiei was silent. Keiki was also born on Mt. Hou and also lived there not too long ago, so Teiei very much understood him. Etiquette required that she should have denied Gyokuyou's words, but she couldn't ignore her conscience in order to say something.

"This could just be destiny. I originally wanted to ask Ren Taiho to come, but because the Kingdom of Ren was currently in turmoil, there was no way I could ask the Taiho to leave her kingdom at a time like this, not to mention that I had just asked her to help."

Renrin's native kingdom, Ren was facing internal disorder. Teiei had also heard this, so she could only nod.

"And also, I recalled that Kei Taiho was closest in age to Taiki. Though his native country has also been unstable recently, perhaps spending some time with Taiki will make him a little easier to get along with."

Hearing this, Teiei only forced a smile. "Yes."

Gyokuyou laughed lightly and suddenly smiled again. "The Queen of Kei very easily gets herself into unnecessary trouble, and Kei Taiho's personality sometimes makes it even worse for Keiou. I hope he can learn some things from Taiki's friendliness."

Teiei silently nodded in agreement.

It seems that in the places outside of Mt. Hou, the unrest never ceases.

Together, Taiki and several nyosen followed behind Keiki. It wasn't easy for a child like Taiki to keep up with Keiki, especially since Keiki didn't think to slow his pace down for Taiki. When the line of them arrived at Shiren Palace, Taiki was already out of breath.

Shiren Palace's layout was basically the same as that of Rosen Palace. After Keiki entered the palace, no one knew what he was pondering as he walked through and looked at every room. Taiki guessed that he was thinking fondly of the days that he had spent here before, so he stood quietly to one side.

After Keiki had gone around the palace once, he entered the center room and sat down. Taiki still said nothing.

There was furniture inside of Shiren Palace, but the curtains and decorations had all been put away.

Keiki sat like this and watched the nyosen busily begin to arrange things.

Seeing that Keiki seemed like he had completely forgotten about him, Taiki began to get restless.

However, Keiki's face showed a mood of contemplation, so Taiki didn't dare open his mouth to bother him.

He just waited by Keiki's side, but that also felt a little bit too impolite.

When Taiki was uncertain about what he should do, he spotted a nyosen carrying in a tea set and couldn't help but let out a big sigh of relief.

"Excuse our disorder. Please have some tea," said the nyosen, as she passed over a cup of tea. "Because you haven't said anything, Taiki doesn't know what to do."

"Oh..." It seemed as if Keiki had finally remembered that Taiki was at his side and looked over at him.

"Excuse me." The expressionless Keiki gave Taiki a nod, which was meant as an apology.

"Um... am I bothering you? If so, then I'll go back first." Taiki asked this very cautiously. However, before Keiki could open his mouth, a nyosen spoke for him.

"Oh, not at all. Come and drink some tea as well." The nyosen pushed a chair out for Taiki, and he sat down very hesitantly. Yet, he really felt that this situation was extremely awkward.

"Um... Might I ask where you live, Kei Taiho?"

"Kei Kingdom."

"What kind of a place is Kei Kingdom?"

"It is a kingdom in the east." Keiki's answer carried no feeling, and afterwards, he didn't say any more.

Taiki still had absolutely no idea what kind of a place Kei Kingdom actually was.

"Did you used to live on Mt. Hou too?"

"Yes."

"Did you live here from the time you were born? I just got here not too long ago."

"I lived here from the time I was born."

"Then, for how long did you stay here?"

"I left two years ago."

"Then did you choose a ruler two years ago?"

"I didn't encounter my ruler until last year."

"Oooh..." said Taiki. "So you left the mountain two years ago to go find your ruler."

"Right."

"Might I ask..." Taiki lowered his head and looked at his flower-scented tea. "What is choosing a ruler like? Youka said that we receive a revelation, but I don't quite understand..."

However, Keiki's simple answer approached indifference. "When the time comes, you will understand."

"Will I also be able to choose a ruler for sure?"

"Yes, you can as long as you are a kirin."

"Even if I don't know what a revelation is?"

"It is hard to describe a revelation in words. When you meet your ruler, you will understand."

"What if I choose the wrong person, or pass by him and not know it?"

"That is not possible, because the ruler will have ouki."

"Ouki?"

Keiki nodded with no expression showing on his face. "It is the will that the ruler emanates, or you could also call it an air. At any rate, they are not like most people, so there is no way you can make a mistake."

"But I don't think I'm like most kirin. Does that matter? Could it be that the way I choose a ruler is different from other kirin?"

"I don't know much about black kirin, so I can't answer that."

"Oh..."

Taiki was at a loss for what should do now. Beads of sweat seeped out of his forehead.

Before, he had really wanted to meet another kirin, but now that he had one in front of him, why were none of his many doubts eased even a little bit?

"When you left Mt. Hou, how did you find your ruler?"

If he was asked to pick a ruler out of a group of people it might be easier, but to not know where they were, that must be extraordinarily difficult.

"I relied on the ouki to find her."

"Did you meet with a lot of people, and then checked to see if they had the ouki?"

"Even if the ruler was not right in front of me, I can still feel their ouki, so all I had to do was look in that direction."

"So it's like that..." Actually, Taiki still didn't quite understand what he meant.

"You can transform, right?"

"There are no kirin who cannot transform."

"But I can't. I don't know how to transform..."

Keiki looked at Taiki, and Taiki realized that his eyes were bright purple.

"In the beginning, did anyone teach you how to raise your hand? Did anyone teach you how to walk?"

"No."

"It is the same principle. You ask me how to transform, but I have no way of telling you. Even if I did explain it to you, you wouldn't necessarily understand."

"Oh..."

Taiki lowered his head. According to that, perhaps he would never be able to transform.

A deep silence followed. Taiki felt that Keiki had already decided not to say any more, thereupon he stood up and suddenly felt like returning to Sanshi's side.

"Please excuse me for bothering you."

He took a bow towards Keiki, and Keiki silently nodded his head.

"Will I see you again at dinnertime?"

"I believe Lady Gyokuyou said that we would eat together."

"Okay... I'm sorry I asked so many questions."

"Don't be."

Taiki took another bow and then turned to leave. He walked briskly out of the palace, but before he could get to the entrance at the top of the stone steps that lead to the gate, he began to cry. He felt so discouraged and dejected, but he suddenly stopped walking, because he had heard a nyosen calling for him from behind.

"Taiki..."

A nyosen gently put her hand on his shoulder. The warmth and weight of her palms made Taiki feel even worse.

"Maybe I'm not a kirin."

"Nonsense."

The soft hand pulled Taiki into an embrace.

"If I am really a kirin, then I must be a really stupid one."

"That can't be, Taiki."

"I'm sure of it." Taiki pressed into the nyosen. "I'm sorry..."

He felt very apologetic for being a stupid kirin, for only being able to receive all the good things the nyosen offer him, and for not being able to repay them at all.

"How could a child like you have been born?" His grandmother always said this about him.

"Don't worry. You don't need to be sad," his mother would always tell him as she lightly stroked his hair. His mother's hands were just like those of the nyosen, all very warm.

"Don't listen to what your granny said. You just have to be a kind child like you are now and everything will be fine. As long as you are like that, your mommy will be very happy." Then why did his mother always secretly cry?

Every time he apologized to his mother, she would always tell him not to feel at fault. She would look at him while she held back tears and smiled, lightly stroking his head.

"You don't have to worry."

A nyosen had said this to him too, as they gently patted his back. And then she would use her warm hand to hold his while they returned to Rosen Palace. Youka and Teiei comforted him in the same way.

"You don't need to be impatient."

"Exactly. It doesn't matter if you can transform or not. You are most definitely a kirin! So, you don't have to worry one bit."

(You don't need to worry.)

"That Kei Taiho, he doesn't know how to behave."

(Granny's temper has always been bad.)

"Please don't cry. It doesn't matter even if you can't transform!"

(You don't need to feel guilty.)

"That's right, you don't need to worry yourself over such a small matter."

Even Sanshi had come to comfort him, gently patting him. She picked him up with the hand that she had been patting him with, and looked at his face.

"Why don't we go outside for a stroll? The evening wind is very comfortable."

Everyone was treating him so nicely that it made it even harder for him to bear. Their warm hands and tender words only made him feel even worse.

"Then you should take a walk." Youka draped a robe over him. "Come back before dinner! Today, Genkun will also be eating with you, so it'll be very exciting."

Youka sent them off. However, even though Sanshi had carried him outside, he kept crying.

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"Really, Kei Taiho," sighed Gyokuyou who had gone to Shiren Palace. Keiki silently stood at one side.

"Taiki is still so small. How could you make him cry!?"

"Please don't say it like I was bullying him. That was not my intention."

"Of course, I know this...but you could have said things more tactfully."

"I was only speaking the truth. He asked me how to transform, and there really is no way I can teach him."

Gyokuyou sighed again. "To say it like that is too cold. Taiki's fortunes are not good. He grew up in Hourai, so he's not like you. You should have..."

"Because of that, you should have asked En Taiho to come, since he was also born in Hourai. I don't think I am qualified for this."

"Keiki..." Gyokuyou spoke slowly in a voice full of dignity. "I asked you to come today, because I felt that in doing so, both you and Taiki would benefit."

"I--"

"Don't you think that I, Gyokuyou, would know your troubles?"

After hearing Gyokuyou say this, Keiki could only give a heavy sigh. He thought of the ruler of his native kingdom.

Keiki's master grew up as the daughter of a common merchant family. To speak well of her, she was a slender woman; to speak badly, her spirit was weak. She did not have the determination to be the ruler of a kingdom. Everyday she would only get more and more depressed. She neglected the affairs of the kingdom and hid deep inside the royal palace, never coming out. No matter how Keiki encouraged or reproached her, no good came out of it. On the contrary, she became increasingly distant.

"Everything you say is accurate, but you have to understand, the accurate method is not necessarily always the best method!"

Keiki was baffled. He didn't understand why something that was clearly accurate was not the absolute best.

"You should first learn how to discern other people's moods. Taiki is a child who likes to interact with other people, and even he is afraid to approach you. Then how do you suppose Keiou could confide in you!?"

Keiki sighed again.

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"Where did Taiki go?" asked Keiki to a nyosen he encountered as he was walking on a path. She pointed behind her, towards the perimeter of Houro Palace.

"He went to the daylily garden. Don't go teasing Taiki again!"

Along the way, every time he inquired about Taiki, he was reprimanded, making him feel very discouraged.

"I never meant to tease him."

"Even if you didn't mean to, you were still too cold to him."

"I will pay more attention to what I say."

That was all he could reply with.

He walked gloomily along the path between the rocks as he continuously encountered the nyosen on the way who either scolded him or otherwise expressed their disapproval. It wasn't easy to reach the small garden that was bursting with daylilies.

Keiki stopped. In the middle of an area occupied with yellow flowers in full bloom, he saw a nyokai sitting with bent legs on the ground. Taiki was laying face down upon the nyokai's leopard portion.

Taiki really was a strange kirin, he thought.

He was certainly a kirin, but since the color of his mane was different from the other kirin, his appearance gave Keiki a strange feeling.

There was another reason that made Keiki feel unusual, and that was that he was not used to interacting with small children. Their small bodies and slender limbs made Keiki feel like they were a different kind of

creature. Taiki's huddled figure, which made him look even smaller, especially caused Keiki to feel uneasy throughout his whole body.

He hesitated, wondering if he should speak, when just then, the nyokai noticed him. Taiki followed his nyokai's line of sight and saw Keiki. His dark eyes widened and he hurriedly wiped his face with his sleeve.

Then, he stood up and took a deep bow towards Keiki.

"I'm really sorry about what happened just then."

"Don't be," said Keiki, and then quickly added, "I should be the one apologizing to you. My manner towards you was too cold."

"Oh, it wasn't." Taiki shook his head. Keiki saw this and couldn't help but think how incredible it was.

How could a neck so thin hold up his head?

"It's because I'm worthless. I'm really very sorry."

"No... May I sit next to you?"

"Please, sit."

After Keiki sat down, Taiki did the same. Keiki watched as Sanshi lowered her body in respect to him.

"Is she your nyokai?"

"Yes, her name is Sanshi."

"She looks like a very good nin'you."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki blinked his eyes.

"Are there nyokai who aren't good?"

"There are. The more forms of beasts that are mixed, like Sanshi, the better the nyokai. Sanshi, you may leave. I will accompany Taiki."

Hearing Keiki say this, Sanshi bowed deeply towards him and walked towards the path.

Keiki watched Sanshi's leaving figure and creased his brow.

"She is a good nin'you, but her powers have not yet been released."

After Taiki heard this, he tilted his head as if he didn't understand, and his mane touched the daylilies, causing them to gently sway.

"It should be because you have not displayed your full power. The nyokai and her master are very closely connected. If the kirin gets sick, the nyokai will also be unhealthy."

"Then...am I sick?"

"This was only an analogy. However...perhaps your condition could also be considered an illness."

"Really..."

Seeing the child in front of him hang his head in hopelessness, Keiki sighed heavily. He was really helpless in these situations.

Keiki spent a little bit of time figuring out what to say. Taiki had lowered his head in silence.

"May I ask you why you cried a moment ago?" This question may have been too blunt, but Gyokuyou had told him that he had to comprehend Taiki's mood.

"I'm sorry..." The small kirin contracted his body.

"I didn't want you to apologize. I just wanted to know the reason."

Taiki lowered his head further. "Because I feel like I'm so worthless."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like I'll never be able to learn how to transform, but the nyosen are all expecting me to..."

"Do you care that much about the nyosen's feelings?"

Hearing Keiki ask this, Taiki lifted his head with a painful look on his face.

"Yes, because everyone treats me so well. My being able to live on Mt. Hou, and my receiving everybody's extremely thoughtful care, is all because of the fact that I'm a kirin, but I can't do any of the things a kirin should be able to do. To show everyone my appreciation, I hope that I can at least transform for them to make them happy, but when I think that maybe that day will never come, I feel so useless..."

As he was saying this, Taiki's eyes began to fill with tears.

"Please don't cry, or else the nyosen will scold me again."

Taiki heard this and blinked his eyes.

"Kei Taiho, you get scolded by the nyosen too?"

"Of course I do. The nyosen do not hold back when it comes to kirin."

After Taiki heard this, he finally smiled a little bit.

"You do not need to mind the nyosen so much. They are here to take care of you. You are their master."

"But..." Taiki lowered his head again and spoke haltingly with a quiet voice, "Without the nyosen by my side, I can't do anything. I have to rely on them for everything, so it's so hard to think of myself as their master."

"Your way of thinking is very strange."

"Really...?"

Taiki's voice sounded once more like it was full of sadness, causing Keiki to

panic again. In his mind, he couldn't help but think that he clearly wasn't suited to play this part, just like he had told Gyokuyou. He didn't know what she had been thinking when she asked him to come.

"Ah, I was not criticizing you."

"Yes..." Taiki nodded his head, and said in a small voice, "It's like this at home too."

"At home?"

"Yes, at my home in Hourai. I could never win the love of my granny or my mom. I always made mistakes and granny would get mad, and my mom and dad would always sigh."

The occurrence of the shoku that swept Taiki to Hourai was still clear in Keiki's memory. He had still been on Mt. Hou at that time.

"And then, Sanshi came to get me and I arrived at Mt. Hou. The nyosen all told me that my real home was Houro Palace, and then I suddenly understood. Because I was not originally my parents' real child, so 60

nothing I did was ever right. But...it's the same at Houro Palace. Though no one lectures me or cries because of me, I still have no way of making everybody happy. I often think that perhaps I'm not a real kirin. If I'm not, then I'm not supposed to be staying at Houro Palace, just like I wasn't supposed to be at my other home."

Keiki finally understood. Taiki had left a place he had lived in for ten years before coming to Mt. Hou. Keiki thought that it was just like the bit of sadness he had felt before, when he had to leave Mt. Hou. Not to mention that the small child in front of him was someone who cried and became discouraged very easily!

"You are a kirin. This fact, you need not doubt."

"Really?"

"A kirin can recognize other kirin. You definitely emanate the spirit of a kirin."

Taiki looked up at Keiki.

"It is something like a golden radiance. I can see it very clearly, so I'm sure that

I am not wrong."

Taiki heard this and looked at himself, and then he looked around Keiki.

"But I...can't see it."

"That's probably because your powers have not yet been completely released. At any rate, it is absolutely certain that you are a kirin."

"Then...can I stay on Mt. Hou? Even though I can't do any of the things a kirin should do?"

"Yes."

Taiki let out a sigh of relief and then blinked his eyes again.

"Could it be...that you miss your home in Hourai?"

"Yes, I think about it often, but then I feel guilty toward the nyosen again."

"I don't have a mother, so I don't understand... Do you miss her?"

Keiou missed her late mother very much and often thought of her home. So much so that sometimes she would yell at Keiki and demanded that he let her return to the life she once had.

"You don't have a mother?"

"Most kirin do not."

"Then I guess I'm lucky."

"But we have our nyokai and nyosen... However, you have a mother. Do you very much hope to see her again?"

Taiki didn't say anything. He just nodded his head vigorously.

"You don't need to feel ashamed toward the nyosen."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki lightly nodded his head.

"But I'm not that family's child, so there's no use in thinking about my mother."

"I see."

"The nyosen are so good to me. If I keep thinking of home, there will definitely

be a punishment."

"There won't."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Taiki began to sob quietly. He hugged his knees and buried his face between his legs. At this, Keiki panicked and wondered if this counted as him making Taiki cry.

"Ah... Taiki...?"

"I'm sorry..." After Taiki said this, he shrunk his body even smaller. Keiki was at a complete loss as to what to do. Taiki's steel-colored hair hung down, revealing his thin neck, making him look that much more helpless, as did his shoulders, which were wrapped around his knees. Keiki hesitated a little and then attempted to put his hand upon Taiki's shoulder.

"I'm sorry..." apologized Taiki again, which confused Keiki.

"You do not have to apologize."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki began to bawl. Keiki emulated the nyosen and pulled Taiki into an embrace, and Taiki also hugged him tightly. Seeing Taiki so sad, of course Keiki empathized with him, but it was Taiki's warmth that caused Keiki to feel fondness for him. He lightly stroked Taiki's head and Taiki hugged him even more tightly, saying between sobs, "I...really want to go home..."

"I understand."

"I miss my mom..."

Hearing Taiki say this, Keiki felt very deeply that this little kirin was very lonely.

The sky had already become an orange-red color. The rays of the setting sun reflected off the sea of clouds and created an incredible glowing.

Keiki held Taiki's hand as they went through the paths of the maze, which were filled with the lights and shadows of the setting sun. As Taiki walked, he thought of his hometown.

He had played throughout the maze everyday, spending his days very happily and very quickly getting used to not having to go to school. Also, he had never

had any friends that were his age, so even though he was the only child on Mt. Hou, he had never felt particularly lonely.

Sanshi and the nyosen treated him very nicely. Here, there was no grandmother to yell at him, nor did he ever see his mother argue with his grandmother because of him. And of course, he never saw his mother secretly crying after an argument. He would also never again see his mother fighting at night with his father over him, and then having his father call him out to the front and sigh in disappointment as he lectured him.

The nyosen had told him that Mt. Hou was his real home, and he never once doubted this statement.

The nyosen took care of him meticulously, welcoming him from the bottom of their hearts, which contained all of him. Taiki knew that they had really been very happy with his return to Mt. Hou.

And thus, he felt that he shouldn't be longing for a place in which he didn't belong, and that that wasn't fair to the nyosen.

However, those thoughts still frequently flashed into his mind.

Thinking back now, the long hallway in his old house seemed more interesting than this maze; the yard seemed more beautiful than any of the small gardens at the palace. Compared to being surrounded by nyosen, his days at school where no one paid him any attention and where he just stared blankly at other people playing seemed happier. In the end, his impressions of his mother, father and brother were even better than Sanshi and the nyosen.

It was probably dinnertime there. Was his mother sitting with his grandmother and brother around the table? When would his father get home today? Would he return a little earlier and let him help him wash his back as they bathed together?

When he recalled these things, he would always remember them that much more fondly.

Have the hydrangeas in the backyard bloomed yet? Has grandma taken the parasol out of the storehouse and used it yet? After mom and grandma argue, will one person still hide in the bathroom? Can his brother go to the bathroom in

the middle of the night by himself yet?

Do they occasionally think of him?

How sad would it be if they did already forget about him! What if they didn't forget about him, but were very happy that he had disappeared? That would be even sadder. However, if everyone still thought about him... that thought made him saddest of all.

"Taiki."

He suddenly felt like he was about to cry again, so Taiki quickly blinked his eyes.

"Yes."

"Would you like to come to Shiren Palace for a bit?"

Taiki lifted his head to look at Keiki. Keiki still had no expression on his face, but the hand with which he was holding Taiki's was very warm.

"But we have to go eat with Lady Gyokuyou..."

"It's only for a little bit."

"Okay..."

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Keiki walked straight to Shiren Palace and told the welcoming nyosen to withdraw, as he took Taiki into the bedroom. The small yard to the east of the bedroom was surrounded by a towering cliff wall, the top portion of which was bathed in the light of the setting sun, causing the green moss to radiate. The light reflected into the room and highlighted the entire room with the color of the sun.

Keiki lightly patted Taiki's hand and released it. He stood in the center of the room, lifted his head slightly, and closed his eyes. As Taiki looked at him, with his head cocked to the side in uncertainty, something happened.

It was an unimaginable sight. Keiki's body began to shake and melt. It looked like the melting of glass or metal. The melted portion appeared to flash with a golden light and extended in all directions. After it extended, it seemed as if it was an article of clothing being flipped. Before Taiki could even shout, he saw

only a beast standing in front of him.

"Ah..."

It happened in the matter of a few short seconds. The clothes that had originally been on the beast fell to the floor with a plop. The beast lowered his head a little bit, which had been held high, and turned to look at Taiki.

He still had those purple eyes, and that golden hair, no, mane. His neck was not as long as that of a giraffe, and his legs were like those a deer, more slender than those of a horse. There were a few warmly yellow stripes upon his body, but only on his back. Also, it would be better to call them stripes, than to say that it was an interweaving pattern in his fur that appeared to change colors when looked at from different angles.

"Kirin..."

Taiki finally understood that he and a giraffe had nothing in common. They were, in fact, completely different creatures. His face was more similar to a deer's than the long face of a horse. On his forehead was a diverging horn, which made him feel even more like a deer, except that he only had one horn and it was shorter than any deer's. His color was white and it was as if he radiated a pearly white metallic luster. Under the twilight, he emanated a muted red light.

A golden mane rested in a line upon his beautiful neck. Taiki remembered that Keiki's hair had grown all the way down to his knees, but it had obviously become much shorter after it changed into a mane.

Besides becoming shorter, it had also become finer. The fluttering golden mane looked like a burning golden flame.

His hooves resembled a horse's, and his tail was longer than a deer's. The portion of the tail that was connected to the body was very thin. Again, it was not quite like a horse's tail; its length and thickness felt like it was somewhere between that of a cow and a horse.

"Kei Taiho... Is this...a kirin?"

"Yes."

He was not originally expecting the kirin to reply to him, but he heard the reply

in Keiki's voice.

"It's not like I thought at all."

"Really?"

He walked closer to get a better look and realized that the kirin was a big animal. Even though it looked thin, it was probably a little smaller than a horse. He wanted to reach out and touch the kirin's soft sparkling fur, but when he recalled that this was Keiki, he couldn't help but hesitate.

"I had no idea that the kirin was such a beautiful creature."

Taiki just stood and stared, whereupon Keiki lowered his head so that it was closer to Taiki's nose.

"Do you like it?"

"I do!"

Taiki felt his face becoming red.

"Will I transform in this too?"

"You are a black kirin, so your color will probably be different."

"Right..."

He didn't know what it felt like to change into the form of a beast.

"Do your forelegs feel like arms?"

"No, the forelegs are just forelegs. After you've transformed, you will no longer feel like a person."

"The horn and tail don't feel especially different or anything?"

"The tail does not have much feeling. As for the horn...the base of the horn feels like a fire burning. It should be because your consciousness is all concentrated in this portion. Yes... When you transform, your entire consciousness comes together in your forehead."

Taiki tried to imitate Keiki and closed his eyes, as he tried to bring his consciousness into his forehead.

Unfortunately, nothing happened. Taiki heaved a sigh.



"I don't think this is something I can learn very quickly."

"You don't need to worry."

"Yes. When you transform into this, you must be able to run really quickly, right?"

"Right. Also, kirin can gallop about in the Yellow Sea. If we ride the wind, we are faster than any sort of bird. As long as we're happy, we can even circle the entire world."

"Can you go to Hourai too? I heard that Hourai was at the most eastern edge of the world."

"We can, as long as you want to."

Taiki blinked his eyes.

To turn into such a beautiful beast and gallop across the entire world in the air, that must be a very satisfying experience. As long as he learned how to transform, whenever his loneliness was too hard to bear, he could secretly return home to look around!

"If you will consent to it, tomorrow morning I can let you ride on my back for a stroll."

"Really?"

"Yes. All right, you should go back to the palace first. Lady Gyokuyou is probably waiting for you. I will arrive shortly."

"Okay!"

Taiki bowed deeply.

"Kei Taiho, thank you very very much."

Chapter 6

"Originally, I was really worried..." Youka stopped her needlework. Since Taiki had arrived at Mt. Hou, he had grown a little bit. All his clothes had to be redone or lengthened.

"He's so close with Kei Taiho right now. It's so great." The nyosen who were doing needlework with Youka all laughed, and Youka laughed with them.

Youka will never forget the excited look on Taiki's face on the day he came running into the palace and told Youka that Keiki had showed him his transformation into a kirin, and that on the next day, he would let Taiki ride on his back for a stroll. He had been so happy, he didn't get to sleep until the middle of the night.

The following day, Taiki came back to Houro Palace with a messy head of windblown hair, and again, was so excited that he almost couldn't sleep.

"Genkun never makes a mistake!" said a nyosen as she began to laugh.

"Recently, Kei Taiho has been emulating Taiki and is starting to pay attention to the feelings of the people around him. It feels so fresh and so fun to me."

"I know! Even though he still has no expression on his face."

Keiki had stayed at Mt. Hou a very long time, so he was not too reserved around them.

"Don't ask for too much!"

"That's for sure!"

The nyosen laughed together.

At this time, they heard the sound of light and quick footsteps coming from the direction of the path "I'm home!"

"Welcome back."

Taiki ran in with a messy lump of hair on his head and a joyful expression on his face. Two magical beasts followed by his side; one was Sanshi, and the other was

Keiki's shirei, a youma called Hankyo.

"Where did you go today?"

"Kei Taiho took me to Mt. Ka, and I saw a lot of weird birds!"

Seeing Taiki smiling with such happiness, Youka couldn't help but smile as well. It looked like Taiki had already thought of Keiki completely as his older brother. However, at first, the nyosen would never have thought that a child could become close to Keiki.

"That's excellent."

"Kei Taiho said that he would take me to the Yellow Sea tomorrow and show me how to tame youma."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Youka in a high voice. Hankyo laughed.

"Don't worry. We will accompany Taiki."

"Oh... That's right."

Keiki's shirei would be there, so it should be all right. Though Youka nodded at Hankyo, in her heart, she was still a little bit anxious. In the past, there have been kirin that met their end in the Yellow Sea. There, the youma will attack anyone, regardless of if they are human or kirin.

"All right, you should go take a quick bath. It's almost time for dinner."

"Okay!"

Taiki nodded and said to Sanshi and Hankyo, "Let's go!"

After Youka watched Taiki and the two beasts gradually fade into the distance, she put down her needlework.

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"What's wrong?"

When Youka arrived at Shiren Palace, Keiki was just getting out of the springwater at Shiren Cave after a bath. After the springwater emerges out from Shiren Cave, it flows all the way into the lotus pond in front of the palace gate.

"I hear that you are going to take Taiki to the Yellow Sea."

"Oh, this," said Keiki quietly, as he brushed his wet hair back. "Nothing will happen. I will ask the shirei to protect Taiki closely."

"But..."

Keiki smile dryly. "You nyosen really do favor Taiki."

"Because even though Taiki is already ten years old, in regards to him being a kirin, he's still too young."

"You cannot say that." Keiki leaned on the gate and looked down at the lotus pond. "The summer solstice is only a half month away."

Youka hung her head.

"I just went to the Reikon Gate and it looked like were already over fifty riders waiting there."

"That many?"

Keiki nodded. "I had originally thought that since Tai was on the opposite side of the Reikon Gate, there wouldn't be as many people climbing the mountain. Perhaps they had not just come to climb, but have been walking around near the four gates, waiting for the Kirin Flag to rise."

Some people walk around along the Kongou Mountains. If they wait this way, after they see the Kirin Flag being raised, they can enter on the very next Ankou Day. This is because on an ordinary horse, it is not possible to make it to any of the gates in time for the Ankou Day after the flag is raised. Shortly after the summer solstice, these people will arrive at Hoto Palace.

"I am hoping that before the summer solstice, Taiki will possess a shirei."

Usually, those who wait by the four gates each believe that only they are the only true ruler, so their personalities are all extremely conceited and arrogant. If a person is reasonable, they need not worry, since most of those people are not only irrational, but also overly confident.

Keiki said further, "I cannot be away from my kingdom for too long. After all, the queen just ascended the throne not long ago, and moreover, the situation in the country is not very peaceful..."

"Kei Taiho, you're the one who really favors Taiki!"

Hearing Youka hold back a laugh as she said this, Keiki creased his brow.

"Otherwise you nyosen will accuse me of bullying him again."

"Indeed." Youka laughed as she took a bow towards Keiki. "Then please accommodate my request tomorrow."

"I won't allow him to get hurt, or else you nyosen will yell at me endlessly when you see me."

"Just don't forget what you've said today!"

"How about it?" asked Keiki as he handed over to Taiki a creature that was similar to a rabbit.

This was the entrance to the Yellow Sea, situated at the edge of the border between the Five Mountains and the Yellow Sea. It was a wilderness overgrown with bushes. The beast that Keiki handed over to Taiki looked like a rabbit with short ears or a big mouse with a long, thin body.

"Jakko? Or hiso?"

The youma in Taiki's hands obediently allowed him to carry it. Underneath the soft fur, he could feel its little heart beating.

"Jakko," replied the youma that he was holding in a rough voice. This was a small youma that Keiki had just tamed into being a shirei.

"Hiso is the name of this youma's species. This one is called Jakko."

Taiki nodded and scratched Jakko's neck.

"Nice to meet you."

Jakko didn't reply; he just made a few sounds.

"Does he not know how to speak very well yet?"

"Usually youma this small cannot really speak. At most, they can say a few single words."

It was Taiki who first discovered Jakko hiding in a bush and secretly watching them. When he was about to run away, Keiki directed an incantation towards him that Taiki could not understand, and when he looked back at Keiki, he glared at it for a moment. After Keiki finished another set of incantations, he called out

Jakko's name, whereupon Jakko obediently came over to his side.

So this was a taming. Taiki had felt a little disappointed because he had originally thought it was going to be an exciting spectacle.

"Are all tamings this easy?"

Hearing Taiki's question, Keiki shook his head. "It was very easy because the hiso is a small animal. It won't be that way with a bigger creature. At times, the confrontation can last half a day!"

"That long?"

Taiki was surprised. Keiki nodded and picked up Jakko. He gently stroked Jakko and put him on Hankyo's back. Jakko then jumped onto the side of Hankyo's ear and began playing with him.

"For instance, I expended quite a bit of effort in order to tame Hankyo."

"Wow..."

Hankyo laid upon a rock nonchalantly, and let Jakko play next to his ear.

"Just then when you were taming him, I thought you guys were just staring at each other."

Keiki smiled dryly.

"We certainly were staring at each other. But is you so much as lose focus for even a second, the youma will immediately take advantage of this opening and run away or attack you."

Taiki understood and nodded.

"The first to be distracted is the one who loses. If it's just a small youma that runs away, then it's not critical, but if it's a powerful youma, it just might exploit your carelessness and take your life. Thus, when a youma enters your field of vision, if you are not confident, run away quickly before you begin to glare at each other. However, if it's a very strong youma, you must transform into a kirin in order to get away from it."

"Oh..."

Seeing Taiki hang his head, Keiki hurriedly added, "Don't worry, your nyokai

can buy you some time."

"Isn't that dangerous for the nyokai?"

Keiki forced another smile.

"If it's a youma you cannot defeat, your nyokai will warn you before you encounter it. Actually, as long as you pay more attention, you will also sense it. After all, we are beasts, so we are very sensitive to the presence of enemies."

Taiki stood blankly for a moment and then a confused smile appeared on his face.

"That's right. We're beasts... I forgot about that."

"It doesn't really matter if you forget something like this."

"Okay. Oh, how did you choose Jakko's name?"

Keiki looked at Jakko. This small youma didn't have the power to be a shirei. He could only go back to the royal palace and play as he wished in the garden.

"I didn't choose it. This name should be what he has always been called."

Taiki tilted his head and looked puzzlingly at Keiki.

"After you've glared for a bit and your opponent concedes his loss, his aggression will subside. At that time, you will be able to discern his name. Actually, I don't quite understand everything about it either, but this is probably how it is. In the blink of an eye, a name will suddenly appear in your mind, and when you shout out this name, the youma will come to your side and serve you. From then on he will always follow your orders, up until the moment you die. At that time, he will gain his freedom."

After he said this, Keiki smiled a little.

"As far as what characters to use for his name, just choose characters that match the sounds."

"I thought I heard you saying incantations just then."

"The incantations are not completely necessary, but if you know them, it makes it easier."

"Oh..."

Taiki sat down upon the rock though he looked like he still had some uncertainties, and Keiki sat beside him.

"When we want to tame youma and make them become our shirei, we must exchange pledges with them--It would probably be more appropriate to say that we bind them."

"Bind them?"

Keiki nodded.

"Youma have been excluded from the Providence of the Heavens, so what we're doing is reincorporating them into the Providence of the Heavens and binding them, in order that they not deviate from the way for a second time. If they let us bind them, then they become our shirei."

"I still don't understand it."

Keiki sighed.

"I'm sorry..."

Hearing Taiki apologize, Keiki hurriedly added, "You don't have to apologize. It is natural that you do not understand it."

"Yes..."

"This world was created by Tentei for the happiness of the people, and he established the Providence of the World. However, if this is so, why do people die and why do they get sick? Why are there youma in the world that attack people? Why do calamities occur? ...Do all of these things exist through the deep deliberations of the Heavens, or do they pass beyond them? Regardless of how it is, all of them go against Tentei's 'goodness.' This is an indisputable fact."

Taiki thought for a little bit and then nodded.

"However, Tentei has his own intentions. They are not things that we can guess. It is like where there is life, there is also death. Because there is a Providence of the Heavens, there must also be some sort of opposite providence."

"Just like the light and the shadow?"

"Your analogy is very accurate. We kirin are shinju that exist to help the people. Still other magical creatures exist that have similar purposes. On the opposite side, there are also some magical creatures whose exist expressly to harm the people."

"Are those the youma?"

"Yes." Keiki smiled.

"So we should tame those creatures who are outside of the Providence of the Heavens and bring them back in, right?"

"That's exactly right. Speaking in terms of the analogy you used, the youma are creatures of the shadow, and in order to command them, we must pull them back into the light and bind them in order to prevent them from returning to the shadow."

"I understand now. But...how do I do that?"

Keiki sighed again.

"This is very hard to describe in words. Actually, I don't understand it completely either. I think I can only explain it in terms of will. That is, you must possess the power of a strong determination to pull these youma under your own control. However, it's not enough to simply have the determination."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki's face filled with uncertainty.

"Let me say it this way. All kirin possess a special 'power.' As to the magnitude of this power, it differs from kirin to kirin, but it is certain that every kirin possesses this special power."

"Is it because of this special power that kirin are all able to transform?"

"Yes, this is a power we are born with and have nothing to do with our will. Thus, no matter how much we hope to tame a youma, if our natural power is not strong enough, we will still be defeated in the end."

"It's just like people's physical strength or their running speed. They're all born with it."

"Right. You understand my meaning." Keiki sighed in relief. However, Taiki tilted his head again and spoke.

"But...using our strength to bind youma into the light side is a very difficult thing, rite? Can we not be distracted even for a second? If we do lose our attention a little bit, do our powers weaken?"

Keiki sighed again.

"I'm sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize. Perhaps...I am being too hard on you by saying these things." After Keiki said this, he deepened his voice. "You must listen to me calmly. --Shirei will eat kirin."

"Huh?"

"More accurately, they eat the corpses of kirin. After they eat a kirin's corpse, they are able to possess the kirin's power for themselves."

Taiki turned back to look at Hankyo. Hankyo, who had been resting his large head between his forelegs, turned to look with his expressionless face. Taiki couldn't tell from his behavior any changes in his heart.

Keiki smiled uneasily.

"You don't need to be afraid. Hankyo will not attack you. Kirin are part of the light, and youma are part of the shadow. Unless we specifically give it to them, they cannot take our power without our permission."

"Y...yes."

"Kirin rely on their power to tame youma and pull them into the light. However, youma have their own innate magical powers, so in order to tame a powerful youma, you must have the power to match him. Youma will, from the power a kirin uses when he is taming them, measure that kirin's abilities."

"Yes..."

"They will assume that after the kirin dies, his power will be given to them, so they will first determine if it will be worth it to become this kirin's shirei."

"I think I understand what you're saying."

"If you have successfully tamed a youma, they will never refuse your command, because they know that after you die, your power becomes theirs."

"So that's why you said it was a pledge?"

"Right. Because in order to take a creature from the shadow and put them in the light in a way that they not return once again to the shadow, it is necessary to bind up their chain, and to also protect ourselves."

"So that they can live under the light?"

"Yes. The chain that binds the shirei and protects us is their 'name.' Kirin rely on their will to draw forth a youma and discern his name. And then, the kirin formally confers this name upon the youma and accepts him as his shirei. The youma then determines the power of the kirin through the kirin's will and accepts the kirin's command while keeping the right to acquire the kirin's power after his death. This is what taming is."

"Then the youma eats the kirin's body after he dies, obtains new powers, and then regains his freedom once again?"

"Right. However, the conditions are that when a youma is the kirin's shirei, he absolutely must not defy his kirin. He can only use all his strength to protect his kirin, but never harm him."

Taiki took a close look at Hankyo. He had originally thought he was an interesting creature, but now he felt like he was completely impenetrable.

Hankyo glanced at Taiki and then opened his mouth widely. "...!" Taiki crouched down in fright.

Hankyo yawned casually and smiled.

"Hankyo!" Keiki smiled dryly as he rebuked him.

"Actually, older kirin all use a few tricks. Do you know what divination is?"

"Do you mean like fortune-telling?"

"You could call it that. When we are hunting powerful youma, we borrow some techniques from divination or sorcery, geomancy, those types of things. However, these are all very profound areas of study.

If you ask the nyosen, they will teach you, but it isn't something you can learn in a short amount of time."

"Yes."

"We must first choose the day, the land, the direction and the youma. When we subdue the youma, we seek a situation where the youma's powers are weakest, and where we are strongest. However, even if you don't plan it out like this, it doesn't mean that you won't be able to subdue the youma. It is the same with the incantations. Because the effects are not as powerful as in divination or sorcery, they are not essential. But if you are used to saying them, then when you don't say them, it will feel strange. That's all."

"Then does it matter if I don't learn them?"

"Would you like to learn them? Even a little will help you out."

Taiki nodded. Keiki then reached out his hand and held onto his shoulder to straighten his posture.

"First of all, you must have proper posture. You must engrave this in your mind."

"Yes."

"Spirit is divided into seiki, the spirit of life, and shiki, the spirit of death. The morning is full of seiki, while the afternoon, shiki. It is best to tame youma in the early morning, which is filled with seiki. The air that we inhale through our noses is seiki, and the air that we exhale from our mouths is shiki. When you're breathing, you must pay attention to this. You must never reverse this. When you exhale, you should exhale lightly. This is also something you should practice during ordinary times. Otherwise, it will be hard to make a habit out of it."

"I should breathe in through my nose and breathe out through my mouth."

"When you want to avoid youma, you should employ the Uho walk."

Keiki demonstrated a special method of walking for Taiki.

"If you encounter a youma and you want to avoid eye contact with them, then you should use Koushi, Teeth-striking. The Tsuitenban works especially well, wherein you firmly bite down the right part of your jaw. If you want to concentrate your spirit, sound your front teeth. This is called Meitenko."

Taiki sighed. "Can I really remember all of this?"

"You can remember them very quickly, but in order to perform them skillfully, you must still practice.

You only need to ask the nyosen and they can all teach them to you."

"Okay."

"Just then, I used the Nine-word Mantra to stop Jakko from running away. You need to hold your hands like so."

Taiki imitated Keiki's clasped hands.

"This is called the Sword Seal. Ready your hands at your waist, draw your sword, and then perform four verticals and five horizontals."

Keiki took Taiki's hands and gestured with them.

"Now say, 'Rin, Byou, Tou, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zen, Gyou.'"

"...This is really hard."

"You'll be able to say it with some more practice. The movements must be well-executed. Once you see your opponent lose his aggression, you need to say an incantation. However, this requires knowledge of divination. Just remember this much for now: 'Shinchoku Meichoku, Tensei Chisei. Jinkun Seikun, Fuo Fudaku. Kimi Koubuku, Onmyou Wagou. Kyukyu Nyo Ritsurei!'"

Taiki looked very anxiously up at Keiki, and Keiki forced a smile.

"Kimi Koubuku, the monster submits; Onmyou Wagou, the light and the dark unite. Kyukyu Nyo Ritsurei, quickly according to the laws."

"Um... Okay."

"And then put your right hand on your head with your palm facing outward to receive the Will of the Heavens, and your left hand should be pointing down toward your feet. Then, call out the name of the youma. Sometimes only the sound of his name appears in your mind, and sometimes the characters for them will also appear. All of this is instinctive to a kirin."

"Yes."

Taiki heaved a sigh. Keiki patted a very discouraged looking Taiki.

"We still have a bit of time before the shiki spreads through, so go find a few

small youma and practice a little."

Taiki nodded. However, at the end of the day, not one youma fell under the spell of his incantations.

The summer solstice finally arrived.

Taiki was sound asleep in his bed when Sanshi tried to stir him awake.

Yesterday--or more accurately, it wasn't until very early this morning that Taiki returned from the Yellow Sea, out cold in Sanshi's arms. She looked at his expression as he was sleeping deeply, and although she was not heartless enough to want to wake him up, if she had let him continue sleeping, Taiki would certainly regret it very much.

"Are you awake yet, Taiki?"

Suddenly, Youka's voice carried itself over here, and the cloth curtain was lifted open. Youka poked her head in to look around, and she smirked.

"Oh, really..." Youka smiled and looked at Sanshi. "It looks like he played until really late yesterday.

Any results?"

Sanshi shook her head.

Even though they stayed in the Yellow Sea until the middle of the night, in the end he still wasn't able to subdue a youma. Keiki and the nyosen were at one side helping him out with the divination, but the youma were still able to escape Taiki's glare. Though neither of them said it, Keiki and Sanshi both knew that Taiki was not aggressive enough.

"I see... Then he must have been very discouraged. Even though we may not want to, we should still wake him up."

Sanshi nodded and shook Taiki again. "Taiki..."

Youka completely lifted up the curtain, letting the sunlight in. "Taiki, get up quickly, or else Kei Taiho will have left."

"Oh..." Taiki finally moved a little bit. However, he flipped over and again they heard his level breathing.

"Well..."

"Well, he is still a child."

Hearing someone behind them, Youka and Sanshi hurriedly looked back toward the entrance.

"Genkun!"

Gyokuyou laughed softly. "It looks like we can't wake him up."

"We were out so late yesterday. Just let him sleep," said Keiki who had been behind Gyokuyou.

Hearing this, Youka became flustered. "That would be too impolite. Taiki, it's time to get up now."

"It's no use. Let him get a good rest."

Hearing Keiki say this, Youka shook her head vigorously. "I can't. That way when Taiki gets up, he'll be very sad."

Sanshi nodded her head in agreement.

Sanshi knew that Taiki had returned last night, having completely exhausted his mind and body, but she also knew why he hadn't wanted to go to sleep. Thus, she shook Taiki's body with more force. "Taiki! Taiki!"

After being shaken three times, Taiki finally opened his eyes. He first blinked a little bit, and then suddenly jumped up. "The Taiho..."

Sanshi brushed his hair. "He's still here."

Taiki blinked his eyes again, and then he saw all the adults smiling as they watched him. He face flushed as he lowered his head.

"I'm sorry... Good morning everybody."

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"Genkun, Taiho, we're very sorry. Taiki doesn't usually delay getting out of bed."

Gyokuyou smiled as she received the teacup that Youka had handed her, and then looked at Keiki.

"It looks like Taiki really thinks of you as his brother. This really is too good."

Keiki had only a gloomy look on his face.

"Kei Taiho, you've really helped us out a lot."

Hearing Gyokuyou say this, Youka smiled without saying anything. However, Keiki sighed.

"But I was still not able enough. For that, I profusely apologize."

"All those inherent abilities that we're born with have always impossible to explain in words. You've done so much for him already, and we're very grateful."

Keiki looked even more discouraged. After Gyokuyou finished saying this with a smile, having finished grooming and changing his clothes, Taiki and Sanshi walked out together.

"I'm really sorry."

Putting down his teacup, Keiki stood up and took a bow towards Taiki. "Taiki, I must bid you farewell now."

Taiki looked up at Keiki with his reddened eyes. "Do you really have to go?"

"I can't be away from my kingdom for that long. I'm sorry I was not able to help you out much."

"What do you mean? I should be the one apologizing to you. I was such a bad student."

"You were no such thing."

"Please take care."

"You as well."

"I will."

Keiki looked at Taiki who was holding back his tears with all his restraint, and he put his hand on his shoulder. "Don't be anxious. The Heavens created the kirin. Tentei will aid you."

"Yes..."

"I hope you meet your ruler early on. After you have descended to your

kingdom, Kei Kingdom is just across the Empty Sea, so we will have opportunities to meet again then."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki tugged on Keiki's sleeves with his small hands.

"Will we really be able to meet again?"

Keiki smiled. Seeing Taiki so eager to see him again, it made him very happy.

"I guarantee it. When you go to your kingdom, I will definitely be the first to come congratulate you."

Hearing this, Taiki's little face glowed with radiance. "Okay!"

If he could have, Keiki would have liked to stay until Taiki had successfully subdued a shirei, and also until he had received, without any problems, all those who will climb Mt. Hou. However, that was not possible. He had already been away from Kei Kingdom for too long. In addition, before he had left, he had also informed them that he would definitely be back on the summer solstice at the very latest.

"Where are you leaving from?"

"From Hakki Palace."

"Then can I accompany you to there?"

Keiki smiled. "Of course you can. We should tell Hankyo and Jakko to come as well."

"Yes."

Gyokuyou stood up as well and looked at the big kirin and the small kirin in front of her. "Is Taiki also very close with your shirei?"

"Hankyo often plays with me."

"That's excellent," said Gyokuyou with a smile. She then looked at Keiki, whose hand was still on the little kirin's shoulder.

"Kei Taiho, your achievements have certainly not been small. You've learned how best to act towards people."

"But..." Taiki looked up at Gyokuyou. "Kei Taiho has always been very nice to me!"

Hearing Taiki's serious tone, Gyokuyou glanced at Youka. "Is that so?"

"Yes!" said Taiki with determination. Gyokuyou laughed. Keiki had a complicated expression on his face. All the other nyosen in the room, including Youka, stifled their laughter.

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Neither the nyosen nor even Gyokuyou would have expected that Keiki's awkwardly-expressed kindness would actually be the reason that Queen Kei Jokaku lost her way.

However, that is another story.

After he saw Keiki off, Taiki looked extremely depressed. However, in reality, Taiki no longer had the time to be sad.

From the day after the solstice on, nyosen could be seen everywhere, along the all the paths to Hoto Palace. The grand incense ceremony was performed at Hoto Palace, and the nyosen were all also wearing bright and colorful attire. Both the furnishings in the palace and Taiki's clothes were much more magnificent than during ordinary times.

--The festival season had arrived upon Mt. Hou.

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Taiki was sitting on a rock near the Shashinboku. When walking inside of the maze, the winds always carried with them the scent of flowers, but at the top of the rocks, the wind held only the smell of the sea.

Taiki had always considered this to be incredible.

It seemed as if something was approaching from the southwest.

Taiki thought of the views of the Yellow Sea that he saw when he was riding on the transformed Keiki's back.

Mt. Hou was a mountain that consisted of mounds of strange crags. Green rocks were assembled into a complex landscape that extended all the way down to the foot of the mountain. And though the maze that was formed by these rocks also looked very complicated, there was only one route that reached Hoto Palace.

Starting from a long, long time ago, countless shousen had walked through that path and had already left a deep mark that was clearly visible from up high.

Since there was only one route, there was also only one entrance into Mt. Hou, and the path through the entrance was linked in three directions.

A road stretched across the Yellow Sea. Like the path to Hoto Palace, this road had passed through a good many years, and there was a trace left by the treading of countless people. There were tracks thru the rocks and ruts carved into the steep slopes, all made by people's feet. People had thrown stones into the swamps and streams, and even erected stone tablets in the desert. Across the wider fissures in the great crags, people had built bridges with withered wood; trees had been removed by passers-by, so that eventually there formed a narrow pathway through the dense forests.

These sorts of trails extended through the Yellow Sea in all directions to the four gates.

Of these gates, the Reikon Gate in the southwest had already opened and closed.

Where were the people now, who had entered the gate on the day of the summer solstice?

Youma and youju gathered in the Yellow Sea, so the journey through it was, without doubt, full of difficulty and danger. The people who enter the gate on the same day form a group similar to a caravan, and work together to traverse this dangerous passage. It is also said that there exists even a profession that specializes in protecting them, like a travel escort service.

"My heart is beating really quickly..." mumbled Taiki, as he hugged his knees and rested his chin on top of them.

Sanshi, who was sitting beside him, heard this, and just said quietly, "Don't be nervous."

"Okay..."

This matched up completely to his premonition.

When he was playing or learning a few easier divination lessons from the

nyosen, if he so much as looked out into the southwest, he would suddenly feel as if he couldn't breathe. And when he recalled that the Reikon Gate was in the southwest, he would feel a chill and his heart would beat faster.

This was not a good premonition. He always felt something scary was making its way to him.

"Can I really do it?"

"Of course you can." Sanshi said only this short sentence. Thus, the sound of the wind seemed even clearer as it remained by Taiki's ear.

"Do you think there's a real ruler here?"

"I don't know."

"There probably isn't, I think."

"Do you wish there not to be?"

"Yeah..."

Sanshi looked at her stiff-bodied master hugging his knees.

If there really was an actual ruler here, was Taiki afraid that he would then have to leave Mt. Hou, or that he would not be able to pass this test? Regardless of why, Sanshi very clearly felt Taiki's anxiety after the summer solstice had passed. This pained Sanshi's heart even when she was just by his side.

If the people climbing up Mt. Hou were not those that think themselves the ruler, then they were those that were supporting those with the abilities to be the ruler. Thus, the real ruler was not necessarily amongst them.

Or perhaps, Taiki was afraid to find his ruler.

After kirin go through the process of choosing their ruler, they carry the fate of the kingdom upon their shoulders. In addition, the ruler's conduct in government carries upon it the fate of the kirin.

As soon as the ruler strays from the proper path, the kirin must bear the consequences. At that time, he will suffer a sickness called Shitsudou. This is a serious illness that is not easy to cure. Thus, it could be said that the ruler holds the life of the kirin in his hands.

To entrust one's own fate to another person is naturally a very frightening prospect.

"The real ruler won't climb the mountain this early..." It was very obvious that Taiki had said this for his own ears. Thus, Sanshi didn't say anything.

Taiki didn't have any shirei, nor could he transform, and he still only understood a small amount about being a kirin. In this situation, it was normal to feel apprehensive. No one callously blamed him for it.

"Kei Taiho, he..." Taiki looked from the southwest to Sanshi. "He said it, right? That the Heavens would help me out?"

Taiki looked up into the sky again, and even though his face carried the innocence of a child, it revealed a resolve.

"Yes."

The wind on top of the rock blew by swiftly.

Afterword

Hello, everybody.

I don't know when it started, but there's been a *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* boom recently, and as a result, Chinese-style fantasy stories are getting popular. It startled me because I was afraid that the readers would immediately see through my superficial knowledge of China.

This story is a sequel to the previous work that I did for White Heart, *Shadow of the Moon, Sea of the Shadow*. They contain two separate stories, and this one happens at an earlier time than the other one, but it is still basically a sequel.

The following is something I want to say to the readers of the previous work.

It seems like everything Taiki says goes through, but actually the people on Mt. Hou can't understand him. That's right, it's just like in the last book where everything needed to be translated. Because the story this time is more complicated (there are a ton of kanji that Taiki doesn't know), and also whether or not I mentioned the translators wasn't important, so I didn't write out that portion. However, in my head, I have established that all their words go through an interpreter, so fellow readers, please keep this in mind as well. (To think that I had to ask the readers to accommodate me like this...) *pekori* [note: this is the sound of ono-sensei bowing her head quickly]

The previous book received a good response from readers, so it's because of you that there is a sequel. Thank you very much! I hope that I can write yet another sequel. However...I need to get rid of this habit of needing to separate books into two volumes... Tohoho.

I hope everyone can continue on and read the next volume.

Fuyumi Ono

